

PASSAGES

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ABSTRACT

PASSAGES

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Passages is a collection of short fiction which includes one prose-poem, three short stories (written in a traditional style), followed by three shorter works of an experimental nature. All selections appearing in Passages are written in the first person, although the narrator's stance and character often varies.

The prose-poem, Shadow-Boxing with Time, is a vehicle of retrospection. Although it is self-contained and intended as an independent work, it provides a backdrop when read in conjunction with the stories that follow.

The three stories, Day of Atonement, Baruch Corbin and The Art Classes, are essentially developmental. They deal with a primary encounter with archetypal life experiences for which the main character is ill-prepared.

The last three selections, Marilyn, Observations of a Street-Walker and Passages, are anecdotal in nature and structure. The abstracted theme of the alienated self is depicted through the use of selective and essential detail. Character and emotion are arrived at implicitly rather than explicitly.

For Szymon, Mindla and Chaim

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SHADOW-BOXING WITH TIME

We lay together
In my bed
Your naked body
Damp with warm sweat,
Your nipple
In my mouth.
Thoughts drift back to
Days of warm milk
Before sleep.

We lived in an apartment then,
My family and I,
• With a yellow kitchen
• With a broken lightswitch by the door

And a room I hardly remember.

(It was always dark there.

And it had a patterned linoleum floor).

My cot was in the double parlour

And the house always smelled of

Mom's mandle bread.

I used to pretend that

The hardwood floor I played on

Was a grassy meadow and

I used to imagine that if I

Stepped outside my door

I could find myself

By a corral

With my friends Roy Rogers and Hopalong Cassidy

And I could shoot bad men and Indians.

Henry was my best friend.

He could speak only German

And I only Swedish.

But that made no difference then.

But Henry's dead now.

A fishing accident.

I hardly think of him anymore.

Peretz and Joel lived just around the corner

On Jeanne Mance.

Peretz had a bitchy mother

And Joel had a million toys.

I loved his brightly coloured, metal ray-gun.

It made a whirring squeaky sound.

And Buster, Joel's dog,

Frightened me.

He was bigger than I.

Bernard Bruman lived on Waverly.

Three minutes away

If you cut through the alley.

I haven't seen him for years.

I don't think he's dead

But he may as well be.

I rarely think of him.

At the corner bakery

We could buy candy.

For one penny you could get

A long piece of red licorice or three pieces of bubble
gum or four jaw breakers that changed colours when you
sucked on them.

And for two pennies you could get

A baby bag of Maple Leaf potato chips.

I used to crumple up the bags and squish the contents

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before I began eating.

Shredded chips always seemed to taste better.

And the synagogue was

Close by.

Only one block

Down.

But I was there recently and saw

It was converted and is now

A Greek Orthodox Church.

THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

The first hint that something important was about to happen, came from my teacher, Miss Zaitlin. She had mentioned something about "those days when some of us will not be coming to school" and then, a few days later, it was confirmed. The "High Holidays" would give all Jews a reprieve from school, while the "Goyim" were condemned to go. It gave me a feeling of being one of the chosen people - special in some way. Still, I guarded that pride quietly.

I remembered the year before, when I had first felt that pride in being different. Then, I had worn it like a flag, proud of my distinction, proud of the special favor allotted me. But when the holidays had run their course and I returned to classes, I was filled with a strangely

uncomfortable feeling. A kind of paranoia had taken hold of me. I felt that I had exposed myself and that now "they" - all of them - knew that I was a Jew. Whenever a gentile looked at me, I shrank back in horror, muttering to myself, "He knows, he knows. . . ."

But all that occurred the previous year. This year, I was determined to expel the sense of guilt by appearing sullen and unconcerned. I hoped that in this way I could avoid attention.

Still, deep inside, I was taken up with the excitement of the coming holidays and each day when I left the school-yard my mood changed drastically, as if I had been suddenly set free.

I used to walk home with my best friend, Aaron, at least as far as the alley. Aaron was also Jewish and when the news came we spent much time discussing it. We made plans for those days, but each day, we changed our plans.

At last we agreed to a chess tournament. We were both very competitive and whenever possible, we challenged one another to a contest of some kind. These contests almost always gained a universal importance and the fact that the competition was limited to just the two of us, seemed not to diminish the results in any way.

Where chess was concerned, I was particularly aggressive. I felt that I had the obvious advantage since

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my great-grandfather had been the world chess champion for many years. It was only fitting that I should uphold the family honour. Of course, Aaron refused to bow to this reasoning, so this tournament gained an even greater importance in my mind. I was determined to inflict a decisive victory and I was certain that the New Year would usher in with it, my great personal glory.

However, at home things were different. I remember thinking that my father was more morose than the occasion seemed to demand, though of course, there was an obvious problem of perspective. I was only nine at the time and I approached every holiday with a kind of expectancy and simplistic joy - like the feeling of a coming birthday party. But my father is one of those men who relates to religion with a quiet and sincere stoicism. My enthusiasm seemed almost to irritate him, as if I were being disrespectful and might infect him somehow.

In the days preceding the arrival of the Jewish New Year, I spent less and less time with my father. He seemed to me pensive and withdrawn. He would sit alone in his favorite seat, with his thoughts elsewhere and I could sense that I was not welcome on his lap (which was my favorite seat). Usually, he would sit with me in the evenings and relate "Baba Yaga" stories, but in those days, the stories were suspended. (Baba Yaga was a sinister old witch responsible for terrorizing children).

Though the tales frightened me, it was a deliciously warm and secure fear. When the Baba Yaga stories were stopped, I had the sense that something essential to my well-being had suddenly left me unprotected, alone and empty.

In my father's presence, I acted much more carefully than usual. I tried to emulate him - to give the impression that I too was contemplating the universe. I moped quietly on the floor and studied him closely, though I did my best to avoid his eyes.

I wanted very much to understand, but I refused to ask him any straightforward questions for fear of showing my ignorance. Most probably, my best source of information would be my mother. If I was clever, I could subtly pry some facts loose without her realizing how deficient I was.

But during those days, I noticed a change in my mother as well. It was not so pronounced with her and I found it difficult to precisely pin-point what it was. In a round-about way, I suppose what gave me the impression, was the fact that she was always doing something. If she wasn't cooking, she was dusting, and if it wasn't that, she got down on her knees and scrubbed the floors. It's true she was always doing those things, but now she seemed different - as if invigorated by some added force which prevented her from getting tired. I asked what all the fuss was about and she explained without looking up or

missing a stroke, "We have to prepare for 'Yom-Tov'."

She said it as if this were the most obvious fact imaginable and she continued with her scrubbing as though nothing had been said.

I refused to be put off so easily. "'Yom-Tov' means 'good day', right? Then why is everybody so grouchy?" I asked and then made a motion to leave.

At this question, my mother put her rag into the bucket of dingy water and looked up at me. Her hands were raw and I noticed that she was bleeding from a small cut on one of her fingers. I don't think she realized this - at least, she paid no attention to it. She was kneeling on the linoleum kitchen floor with her stockings rolled down to her ankles and her sleeves rolled up, past the elbows. Her face was flushed and her small, grey eyes seemed sad. "Yom Kippur only happens once a year and it's the most holy of holy days - the Day of Atonement. It's a day for meditation and prayer. You ask God to forgive the sins you've committed all year and you pray for a good year to come. Nobody's grouchy. It's just that this is serious. Everything must be ready for His judgment."

While she spoke, I sat down on the floor in the passage. "I'm not sure I understand," I said in a whisper.

She smiled at me with her mouth, but her eyes remained sad. "I'm not so sure that you should understand. It's something one feels, without ever really understanding."

I thought to myself, "The only thing I feel, is left out," but I didn't say this out loud. Instead I asked, "Is Dad going to fast again this year?"

"An adult always fasts on Yom Kippur. I'm going to fast also. It's a way of showing respect and faith. It proves that you're willing to make a sacrifice."

"Do Goyim fast?"

"No, just Jews."

"I'm Jewish. Can I fast too?" I asked this much more eagerly than I had intended.

Again, her mouth smiled, "No, you won't have to until you're Bar Mitzvah. You're not a man yet. God doesn't expect it of you."

This answer did not please me. For one thing, I didn't like to consider myself a child and it seemed that if I wasn't yet a man, then there was no other option left. Besides, it made me feel inadequate - inferior somehow. In situations like this, one has to assert himself, so I asked, "What if I want to fast now? Is it a sin?"

She paused for a long second, as if carefully weighing her response. "No, it's not a sin. But when someone is as small as you, it isn't considered healthy. You need energy. Anyway, you'll have plenty of chances when you get older."

At this point our conversation faltered. For several

minutes, neither of us said anything. This silence became uncomfortable and I thought I detected a look of impatience in my mother's face. She seemed to be waiting for me, so I finally broke the pause. "Just one more question. . . Yom Kippur only lasts one day, right? So what about the other holidays?"

My mother shifted position uneasily and leaned on one hand. "Well, Rosh Hashana lasts two days. It comes before Yom Kippur and Succoth comes a few days later. They're both significant, but not as important as Yom Kippur. That's the big day. Rosh Hashana is celebrated because. . ."

I didn't listen to the end of her response. I was too busy trying to assess the information I had already gathered. It was Yom Kippur that concerned me. I supposed the rest was superfluous.

My mother finished whatever it is she was saying and then looked at me for a while in silence. Then, seeing that I had no more questions, she reached into the bucket to retrieve her rag. She squeezed it dry and I left quietly while she went back to her scrubbing.

It seemed to me that a full understanding of what I had been told, was critical to my evolution. Of course, I could ignore it all for a few more years - my mother had confirmed that. But in my mind, passive resignation to youth implied a loss of grace - if not from God, then

at least from my father. It was clear that a definite plan of action was necessary. But a plan required time. One could not afford to delve into such matters too rashly. That could prove disastrous.

With only two days left before Rosh Hashana, I began to feel apprehensive and impatient. I felt that I would burst if I had to wait any longer, and yet, I wished for more time - to think - to formulate my plans.

Indeed, it was not till the last day, while I was walking home from school with Aaron, that I made my final decision. I reasoned that if the "other" holidays were not so important, then I could ignore them. I could compete in the chess tournament without feeling that I was cheating. But on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, I would prove my worth to all of them - my father, my mother, Aaron, God, even the gentiles who might try to taunt me with their stares when the holidays were over - all of them! My options were limited. In fact, there were no options at all. There was only one thing I could do - one thing I must do. I would fast.

I confided my plan to Aaron and he was very impressed. This made me feel certain that I had made the right decision. He asked me if I thought he should fast also, but I assured him that only those who were strong-willed, dedicated to their sense of identity and prepared to make a super-human sacrifice could possibly qualify for such an

ordeal. So naturally, it was decided that we would have a contest to determine who was the more devout. We would both fast.

I spent the two days of Rosh Hashana at Aaron's house playing chess. We started at about 10:30 both mornings and ended around supper-time. We took no breaks - not even for lunch. In fact, when his mother prepared some salmon sandwiches, we carefully carried the board into the kitchen with us and gulped the food down between moves. The only acceptable excuse for leaving a game was a trip to the bathroom, and even then, if I felt that success was close at hand, I would cross my legs tightly and sway back and forth until the game was over. After each victory I would lean back in my chair, fold my arms across my chest and flaunt a smug smile.

We played a total of twenty-six games, of which I won nineteen and tied three. Aaron was frustrated and angry and I spent the following week hassling him with "I told you, sos." He swore revenge during Succoth, but I was internally confident, and viewed his threats with scorn. During that week, I was more concerned with the coming of Yom Kippur and I completely forgot about the chess tournament when I wasn't with Aaron.

The afternoon before the "big day", I walked home with Aaron and just before we split up at the alley, I reminded him of our contest. I also asked him if he would

be going to synagogue that night. I explained that I had overheard my mother say that a person can't be considered a real Jew if he didn't go to synagogue on the eve of Yom Kippur to hear Kol Nidre and the blowing of the shofar. He gave me a non-committal answer and marched off down the lane.

That night our family ate a traditional supper of gefilte fish, chicken soup, potatoes, boiled beef and kishka. My mother served each dish separately, waiting till one was finished before bringing the next. We ate in unnatural silence. The only sounds were the clicking of cutlery on porcelain and the slurping of soup. This was to be the last meal before the fast - a "last supper". I had heard that phrase before, though at the time I had no clue as to what it referred. Yet, for this slow and ceremonial meal, that phrase seemed perfect and I repeated it in my head several times, rolling it slowly so I could savor it. "Laßsst supp-perrr. . . ." I would have said something - I wanted to - but I bowed to my father's example and chewed quietly with my eyes fixed to the plate in front of me. When the meal was over, the three of us went to synagogue together.

I didn't go into the prayer hall with them; instead, I waited in the lobby and watched for Aaron. He never came.

Occasionally, I glanced into the hall through the

open doors, but the only thing that held my attention for any length of time was the blowing of the shofar. Kol Nidre was no different than the rest of it and yet, the hall was full. Every seat was occupied and the aisles and entrances were crammed with men who were standing and nudging each other for a better view.

When the service ended, everyone poured out of the hall slowly, dragging their feet and keeping their heads bowed low. I noticed that most of the men wore serious faces - the type I had often seen my father wear. Their eyes were watery and their skin was shiny-damp from sweat. But when they stepped out of the hall and into the cool lobby air, their expressions changed almost instantly. Their eyes became animated as they looked round for friends and familiar faces. Soon, the lobby was packed with jabbering people who were shaking hands, kissing, smiling, wishing each other a happy new year in Hebrew, or Yiddish, or English or any number of other languages which I couldn't recognize. The scene reminded me of a boisterous market, like the one I had been to with my mother, on Rachel St. It was just like that, but everyone here was dressed well. I found my parents near the main door. They were with some people I didn't recognize, shaking hands and smiling. I waited till they were alone before I approached. We wished each other a good year, but that was all that was said.

I spent the rest of the evening alone in my corner of the double-parlour and went to bed early, but I couldn't fall asleep. My thoughts were on the coming day. Of course, I was certain that I would succeed in fasting, but I was beginning to question the validity of this decision. I had not told my parents of my plans and I was wondering if that was a mistake. What if I did fast and no one realized? Yes, God would know, Aaron would know, I would know. But was that enough? I needed recognition from my parents, especially my father. Without that, my fast was little more than useless. Finally, I decided that early the next morning I would tell them.

With the dilemma resolved, I set myself to sleep. I rolled over into my sleep position and lay still, waiting for my mind to stop working. It was then I realized that I had never really been hungry before, at least not that I could remember. Of course there were times when food was more desirable than others and there were times when I even had a craving for it. But was that hunger? At that very moment I could feel a rumbling in my stomach - a kind of gurgling contraction of my innards. Was that hunger? I had eaten a large supper and I never ate after supper and yet, now I had the craving. Was that hunger or was the craving just a result of knowing that I wasn't allowed to eat? Was the gurgling just a reaction to my apprehensiveness? On the wall opposite to my bed I could

see the shadows of the leaves from the tree outside my window. Every time a breeze blew, the shadows changed. I made faces out of the patterns and I let the rustling of the leaves outside lull me to sleep.

I woke up early the next morning and found that I wasn't tired though I had only slept a few hours. I put on my navy dress pants, a white shirt and the new pale blue sport-jacket which had been bought expressly for Yom Tov. My father gave me one of his ties, a navy and white striped one, and he made the knot for me. It hung down between my legs to about mid-thigh, so I had to tuck it into my pants. My mother had polished my black loafers the previous night and I admired the shine before putting them on. I was the first one ready and I paced impatiently while waiting till we could get on our way. When my mother asked what I wanted for breakfast, I informed her that I would not be eating until it was permitted. She began to argue, but my father told her to leave me alone and then he patted me on the shoulder and smiled.

It seemed like half the morning had been wasted getting prepared to leave, but in fact, it was not quite 8:30 when we arrived at the synagogue. The service was already in progress and my parents entered the prayer hall immediately while I remained in the lobby to await Aaron's arrival. I paced back and forth for some fifteen or twenty minutes and I was already getting impatient. At last, I

decided to go out and wait on the steps.

It was a bright day. There were almost no clouds in the clean blue sky. It was comfortably crisp and I was glad to breathe in the cool air. From where I sat, I could see straight down L'Esplanade Street. The leaves on the trees flaunted subtle hues of gold and red and brown and from almost a block away, I could see entire families approaching the synagogue. The men were putting on yarmulkas and they carried blue velvet tallus bags with gold embroidery under their arms. Their suits were carefully pressed and their shoes glistened in the sunlight. The women wore beautiful, simple dresses of various colours and everyone was smiling.

My school was on the corner directly across the street and I could see the gentiles lining up in the yard, preparing to be let in. I threw them a defiant glare, but I don't suppose it was noticed by any of them.

I sat on those concrete steps for a long time, watching people come and go, smiling at them as they passed and wishing them a happy new year. Everyone smiled back and wished me the same.

The freshness of the air and the pleasantness of the people made me very happy. It seemed to me a perfect day - no great adventures or achievements, but perfect nevertheless. Every pore in my body felt alive and receptive. It was as if I were in a lovely dream-scape

where the sun shines and birds twitter and flowers sway ever so gently in the breeze. I surrendered joyfully to this reverie.

It was almost eleven o'clock when I saw Aaron approaching along Fairmount Street. He was wearing a brown striped suit which hung loosely at the shoulders and his hands were half hidden in the sleeves. A shimmering, gold yarmulka was balanced precariously on his frizzy red hair and I was certain it would fly off with the slightest gust of wind. He seemed in a world all his own and he didn't notice me until I called his name. The first thing he said to me was, "Let me see your tongue." I looked at him inquisitively and he explained, "It should be white if you haven't eaten."

I obediently stuck out my tongue and wiggled it till he said "O.K." and then, without being asked to reciprocate, he exposed his own tongue for inspection. Sure enough, it was white. We must have looked strange to passers-by, each of us facing the other with white tongue wriggling.

With that settled, we set ourselves to planning the rest of the day. For about an hour we played tag. We ran wildly, completely oblivious to the stares and scoffing glances of those around us. Several times we bumped into people who were standing in the lobby and on the steps in front of the entrance. At those times we would

blurt out quick apologies and then run off to continue our game. Moments later we'd stop in some corner and giggle about the reactions of those we'd bumped.

It was after noon when we decided to stop. We were both breathing heavily and gasping for air. We noticed that the school-yard across the street had filled with students who were out for lunch. The boys were playing British Bulldog and handball while the girls, in their navy tunics and white blouses, were skipping rope and playing hop-sotch. We adjusted our yarmulkas to make sure that they were securely mounted on our heads and then started across the street.

We walked along L'Esplanade, adjacent to the frost fence which surrounded the school and when we got half-way to the alley, we turned back again. We walked boldly, trying to give the impression that we were deeply immersed in our conversation and didn't notice our classmates on the other side. I could hear squealing and laughing and running, but I kept my eyes on Aaron and did not look around. At the corner, we stopped. Aaron was talking about Napoleon and I wasn't listening closely. I nodded and grunted occasionally, just to keep him talking. But I had other things on my mind. I was contemplating this wonderful and glorious day. I stood with my back to the yard and thought to myself how nice it was to be able to stand on a street corner on the other side of the fence

and flaunt my freedom.

We had been talking for several minutes, when suddenly I get the feeling that someone was staring at me from behind with sinister, mocking eyes. I couldn't be sure of this, as I refused to turn around and verify it. I even tried to dismiss the feeling by concentrating on what Aaron was saying. "Trying to conquer Russia was his big mistake. He tried to do it for its own sake, just to prove something I guess, but he didn't really have to..."

I grunted in agreement and he continued, "You'd think he was smart enough to have seen the mistake before he made it. After all, he'd already conquered almost all of Europe..." Again my thoughts drifted away from Aaron's words. I could not shake the feeling of someone staring at me.

At that moment, the bell rang. I could hear everyone begin moving toward the doors. In minutes the boisterous sounds from behind me had turned into complete silence. I snuck a glance around and saw the empty concrete yard. And yet, the feeling of someone staring at me persisted.

"Aaron, do you want to go back to the synagogue?" I asked.

"No, actually I think I'm going home for a while. Maybe I'll come back later. Do you want to come over?"

"No," I said after weighing the invitation, "I'm going back."

We started to go in separate directions, but when I reached the other side of the street, I heard Aaron call my name. "Aren't you hungry?" he screamed.

Up to then, I hadn't really thought about it, so I assumed his question was a ploy to weaken me. "No!" I yelled back, "Not at all. How about you?"

"A little bit, but I'll last. Anyway, I'll see you later." He turned and started marching briskly along Fairmount toward Waverly.

How strange. I had forgotten that I was fasting. Was I hungry? I supposed not, otherwise I'd have thought about it. But then, it was still early. More than six hours to go.

Again, I sat down on the synagogue steps and watched the people come and go. The excitement with which I had greeted them earlier was gone. I was still feeling watched and the sun had, for a moment, slipped behind a puffy grey cloud. I was restless and decided to go for a walk.

By the time I turned the first corner, the sun had come out again. As I walked, I could feel its warmth seep into my body, especially at the shoulders. A brisk, refreshing breeze had begun to blow and I removed my skull-

cap and shoved it in my pocket.

I thought about Aaron and wondered if perhaps he had gone home to eat. After all, he had not had the same upbringing as me. His parents were Canadian born and bred. They didn't have the feeling for religion and culture that my parents had. They were of European stock. They had lived through times when Jewishness could mean death. One must feel bound to something if one is preparing to die for it. Aaron's family, living in Canada, had been allowed enough freedom to live a very goyish life. For them, Jewishness was a mistake of birth, not a way of life. Aaron couldn't even speak Yiddish. He didn't go to Kol Nidre the previous evening. In fact, now that I think of it, I don't remember seeing his parents either. They were Jewish only so far as it suited them. No. It would not surprise me at all if Aaron were at home - eating at that very moment.

And yet, perhaps he would hold out. Maybe he wasn't hungry. I wasn't. It's true my stomach was doing its gurgling contractions as it had the previous night while I was trying to sleep. But that could be ignored. Sometimes I had that same feeling when I was bloated. It had nothing to do with hunger. Still, the more I thought about it, the more intense the contractions seemed. Unlike the previous evening, these contractions seemed more and more like cramps. I also had the feeling of emptiness

in the pit of my belly.

By this time, I had reached Laurier and was proceeding toward Jeanne Mance. The sun had dipped behind another cloud and that crisp breeze that had seemed so refreshing, now gave me chills. I remembered my mother's warning about fasting not being healthy before thirteen and I began to wonder if I was getting sick. The cramps seemed to be getting worse and I was starting to feel nauseous and dizzy. Again, I began to question the wisdom of choosing to fast. But it was too late. I was committed. To eat now would mean losing face. What if I were wrong about Aaron? What if he wasn't eating? And what of my father who had smiled and patted my shoulder when he had heard I was fasting? Could I disappoint him now?

But then, what if I was really getting sick? God makes exceptions in cases of illness. Even adults who are not well are allowed to forego fasting. And besides, I was too young. Even if I were not sick, I could be exempted.

And so I walked with this battle raging inside me - one side screamed "You must!" while the other warned, "You'd better not!" At last, a third voice interjected. It said in a very calm tone, "You can cheat and no one will have to know." But what about God? He would know! And the third voice answered softly, "But He is forgiving

and besides, He doesn't expect it of you."

In the end, this third voice prevailed. My walk had already brought me very close to my home and in minutes I was upstairs and in the kitchen. I examined the refrigerator and pantry for food that might be eaten without being missed. My stomach gurgled loudly, as if crying out impatiently and that emptiness inside me seemed to be sucking at the very promise of food. In that state, everything I saw looked good to me, even the boiled chicken and the beets. I finally settled on a couple of slices of bread, a piece of gefilte fish and an apple. I gulped it all down quickly, barely chewing - just bite and swallow, bite and swallow. When I had finished the food, I drank water directly from the tap. I did this so my mother would not notice that a glass had been used.

I leaned up against the sink and carefully listened to the sounds that now came from my belly. The gurgling was there, but not so loud and the cramps and contractions had ceased completely. I felt much better now. The chill had left me and the dizziness and nausea were also gone. I glanced around the kitchen looking for evidence which I might have left in my haste, but the room was just as it had been when I entered. I straightened my tie, replaced the skull-cap and left.

I was more than half-way to the synagogue when I suddenly got the feeling that someone was staring at me

again. I looked up and down the street, but saw no one. I looked up at the balconies and windows around me, but they too were empty. And still, the feeling persisted. It was as if someone were gazing at me with accusation and mockery - saying without words, "I know what you've done. I know. . . ." I began to walk more quickly, but the eyes kept pace. I looked over my shoulder every few steps and still I saw no one.

At the synagogue stairs, several people were standing about, talking and laughing. As I picked my way through them, they turned away from their conversations and looked at me. I blurted out a meek "Gut Yom-Tov," and they responded likewise with large smiles that showed their teeth. There seemed to be no sarcasm in the tone of their salutations and yet, I had the feeling they were humouring me.

In the lobby more clusters of people were scattered about the floor. I kept my eyes averted and found an empty space where I could stand alone. It was becoming obvious to me that something had to be done. I had failed to live up to my convictions. I had no right to be proud of my Jewishness. I had no right to reap the privileges of my birth. In some way I must compensate. I looked over at the entrance of the prayer hall. The doors were closed. At that moment my salvation seemed to rest there. I must go into the prayer hall and ask forgiveness. It

was my only chance. I walked stealthily to the large wood doors and slowly pushed them open. Inside, some faces in the back rows turned to look at me. Their expressions remained indifferent and they soon turned their attention back to the cantor who was standing on a stage and singing a prayer.

I stepped through and let the doors swing shut behind me. The air here was very hot and damp. I tried to spot my father, but from where I stood, I could only see backs of heads. I walked slowly up the aisle, pausing at each row of benches to examine the men who were seated there, each of them engrossed in solemn prayer. After about ten rows, I caught a glimpse of my father. There was an empty space beside him and I quickly pushed my way past the men who were sitting between me and my goal.

My father was sitting very still. His prayer book was open on his lap and his head was upright with eyes fixed straight ahead. Those eyes were half closed and watery, and sparkling reflections of light twinkled there. The broad black and white striped tallus rested loosely on his shoulders and the tassels hung down between his thighs. He seemed almost in a trance and did not notice my arrival for several seconds. When he finally did recognize me, he smiled and squeezed my shoulder with his hand. Then he returned to his trance.

The prayer hall was not as full as the night before.

No one was standing in the aisles and several seats were vacant. In front of me was a small stage and on it, crowded around the altar, were five men. The two at either end wore long, grey beards and they stood still, with their eyes down and their lips moving almost imperceptibly. The man in the middle was younger - late thirties I guessed. He was standing with both hands resting on the altar. His face was raised and his eyes gazed upward at the high, ornate dome of a ceiling. He was singing loudly in a deep and melodic baritone and every few minutes he paused while the audience whispered an abrupt "Amen" in unison.

On my far right was an area, separated from the main prayer hall by an ornately carved balustrade. The benches there were perpendicular to the rows in the main hall. This section was for the women and it was emptier than the rest of the hall. I did not see my mother among them. The women sat erect and straight-faced. It seemed to me that many were bored.

While I examined the surroundings, a pause in the service occurred. As if some secret signal had been given, the entire congregation rose to its feet as one. I followed their example while the man at the altar began to sing again. He sang a line and then the congregation responded with several words. Another line, another response and so on. A man in the row in front of me was shaking

back and forth violently. His eyes were closed. On my left, another man was bowed low. His eyes were also closed and with a clenched fist, he was pounding his chest in an even rhythm. As I looked around, I noticed several other men bowing and swaying and gyrating and pounding. My father, however, remained still, eyes glowing, body erect like a sturdy old tree. His lips moved, but the words were inaudible. Every once in a while I caught an "Amen" or a "Baruch atah adoni. . ." but the rest was gibberish.

The heat had become almost unbearable to me now and I began to feel that coming here had been a grave error. I could feel my guts burning, as if the food I had eaten had turned into acid inside of me. Sweat trickled down my brow and my eyes were stinging. I had no right to be here. I was a sinner in God's house. The feeling that I was being watched was now stronger than ever and I shrank back with fear, muttering, "He knows, He knows. . ." I felt tiny next to my tree-like father. I began to feel nauseous and dizzy again. I clenched the bench in front of me to steady myself. Then suddenly, the frenzy all around me ceased.

On the stage one of the bearded men had turned toward the red velvet curtain that hung behind the altar. This curtain was intricately embroidered in gold, with stars of David and flowers and the tablets of the Ten Com-

mandments. All eyes were on him as he ceremoniously drew the curtain. He exposed several scrolled torahs which were girdled in brightly coloured sheaths with more ornate embroidery. Hung over the fronts of the torahs were sparkling silver or gold plaques and the sight of all this glitter dazzled me. The man leaned forward and carefully lifted one of the scrolls and with hands clasping the wooden handles at the bottom, heaved it against his chest and shoulder. Holding it this way, he began to walk slowly along one of the aisles.

The congregation shifted toward the aisle and men and boys shoved for position. They held the tassels of their tallaisim in one hand and kissed them and then reached over to touch the torah as it passed.

My father nudged me, "Go on. Kiss the torah. It's a mitzvah." He prodded me on. I was afraid to release my grip of the bench in front of me, but he continued nudging and I finally gave way. I walked slowly toward the aisle, using the bench as I would a bannister - to steady myself. The man holding the torah was getting closer. I glanced over my shoulder at my father and he was smiling reassuringly. His smile didn't help though. Fear and doubt were welling up inside me. My head was pounding. My heart was thumping. This was the ultimate blasphemy. I couldn't go through with it. The sweat that trickled into my eyes was burning. Everything was

becoming blurred. The room was tilting. The man with the torah was very close now. I had to run. I had to escape. I bolted out into the aisle and rushed for the doors. The floor seemed bumpy and uneven as I ran. I thought I'd fall, but I ran anyway, oblivious to everything around me. I flung the doors open and burst out into the lobby. Almost everyone there spun around to see what was happening. Like a frightened animal, I sprang toward the main door.

I was almost out when I felt myself being pulled back. I spun around in a panic and found myself face to face with Aaron. He was clasp^{ing} my arms and shaking me, "What's the matter with you? Let me see your tongue!" His eyes were bulging as he threw open his mouth and stuck out a white wriggling tongue. And all the while he yelled feverishly, "What's the matter with you! Come on, let me see it!"

I felt helplessly bound by his grip. I was ready to fall and I was sucking hard, trying to make my tongue white and then, from the corner of my eye, I saw the prayer hall doors swing open into the lobby. There stood my father. He had seen me and began to approach. Aaron's eyes were wide and he was still shaking me and screaming, "Let me see your tongue! Let me see it!"

All faces in the lobby were turned on me. The room was spinning. I could barely see and my eyes burned. My

father was almost upon us and with a sudden burst of energy, I pushed Aaron away and flung myself out the door into the cool evening. I took a deep breath and the quick intake of cold air stung my lungs. I lunged down the stairs but before I reached the bottom, I doubled over and for a second everything went black.

The next thing I was aware of, was the puddle of puke I was standing in. The bits of food seemed barely digested and a sickly, pungent odour invaded my senses. My shiny black loafers were covered with the disgusting slime and my navy dress pants were flecked from the knees down. I had a terrible taste in my mouth. The backs of my nasal passages felt raw and mucousy saliva clung to my palate and tongue.

When I looked around, I saw my father standing behind me. He was smiling and patting my shoulder. And past him, at the top of the steps, leaning against the doorway with his arms folded, was Aaron. He was also smiling.

BARUCH CORBIN

Baruch Corbin was a tiny, fragile boy with pale, delicate features and mousey brown hair. He wore a small knitted skull-cap secured to the back of his head by one bobby pin. His eyes were large, round and brown. In some ways, he reminded me of a rabbit; small, white, nervous and vulnerable. He even walked with a bounce - almost a hop - and his head, which appeared too big for his dwarf-like frame, bobbed from side to side with each step. He rarely spoke and when he did, his voice came out thin and high-pitched and bell-like, as if a xylophone were speaking.

He was a loner. He had no friends and didn't seem to want any. Most of his time was spent alone in some corner, reading. To some of us, he was an enigma, to

to others, he was just an innocuous shadow.

Baruch used to sit next to me in my grade four class, but in the beginning, I rarely spoke with him. Occasionally, out of politeness, I'd ask him to join us at recess to play tag or British Bulldog. I suppose I pitied him. He seemed such a lonely boy and I felt it my duty to make his life a little easier by offering him companionship. After all, he was new to our school. But he always refused. "I have some reading to do," he'd say in his soft, musical voice. Still, in his quiet way, I think he appreciated my invitations.

As time passed, he seemed to gradually warm up to me. In the mornings he'd smile and give me a shy "Hello." And though he never joined us in our games, I often saw him sitting nearby, with his book open on his lap, watching us as we ran about chasing each other and squealing. Once, I approached him and asked what he was reading. He seemed pleased by my show of interest. "It's called A Boy's Book of Science. It's very interesting. It explains all about atoms and molecules and electrons and it even talks about our solar system."

I had only the vaguest idea of what he was talking about, but I smiled anyway and said, "It sounds very good. Really." Then I excused myself and ran off to join Aaron and Oscar in a game of tag.

In a strange and silent way, my relationship with

Baruch seemed to develop into a close bond of friendship. It was an evolution that I was not aware of at first. Our conversations were sparse and even then our words were uncomfortably formal and overly polite. And yet, there was something more intimate between us. It transcended the awkward formalities. It was something that expressed itself in subtle ways; in timid sideward glances and secretive smiles.

Then one day, during an arithmetic test, he slid his paper over to the edge of his desk so I could see the answers. I suppose he noticed the worried look on my face. Usually, during an exam, he would bend low over his paper and guard it from prying eyes with his free hand. I should have failed that test. Instead, I got the second highest mark in the class and a silver star.

That day I waited for him after class. I thanked him, but he pretended he didn't know what I was thanking him for.

As we walked down the hall together, we heard some screams and raucous laughter from around the corner. A second later, three of the older boys came running toward us. I pulled Baruch out of their path. A tall, husky boy was leading the other two. They ran along the wall and the leader was holding a can of red spray paint which he squirted on the wall as he ran. They paid no

attention to us.

When they had passed, I turned to Baruch. He was staring at the wavy red line on the wall, eyes wide and confused. "Who was that? Why did they do that?"

"Why they did it, I'm not sure. But the one in the front, the big one who looks like a gorilla, that's Warren McGovern." I paused for a moment and then added, "I suppose maybe that's why they did it."

Baruch turned to face me. In his wide, round eyes I could see that my explanation had only confused him more. I took a deep breath and began. "Warren McGovern is the worst bully in school. He's the kind of person you stay away from. He's fifteen and still in grade seven. He's strong, but not very smart." I began walking slowly down the hall while I continued talking. Baruch kept pace beside me in silence, his eyes staring up at my mouth as I spoke. "He's really mean. Does all kinds of crazy things. He once got suspended for slapping a teacher. He just walked up to her and slapped her across the face. It's true. . .

"And last year, during the summer, July I think, he did something really bad. You know those giant firecrackers? We call them blockbusters." Baruch nodded. "Well, Warren shoved one up a cat's ass and lit it. When it exploded, the cat started to spit and scream and scratch. It scratched Warren's hand and he got real mad. He grabbed

the cat by the tail, swung it around over his head and threw it against a fence with all his might. The cat bounced off and fell on the ground meowing and bleeding. It tried to get up and run away, but it kept falling over. Warren just laughed and walked away."

I paused to see Baruch's reaction to my story. He was staring at me in disbelief with his mouth hanging open. "It's true," I assured him. "Cross my heart and hope to die. Aaron, my best friend, told me about it. It happened in his lane."

We walked on in silence for a while and when we got out into the schoolyard I asked him where he lived.

"On Waverly near Laurier," he answered.

"Well I live on Jeanne Mance near Saint Viateur. That's in the opposite direction. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" He smiled shyly and waved as we started off in different directions.

The next day Baruch seemed much more at ease in my presence. His morning "Hello" was shy and reserved as usual, but all through class he threw me knowing smiles. When I asked him to join us at recess he looked surprised (though I had asked him many times before) and he hesitated a moment before responding. Finally he said, "I'd like to, but I don't think I'd be much fun. I could never keep up with you and your friends." He looked down at his

shoes as if embarrassed by his confession and then added, "I had polio when I was younger."

I patted his shoulder reassuringly. "Don't worry about it," I said. "It's just for fun." I took him by the elbow and tugged gently.

He looked up from his shoes and grinned broadly. "Thank you," he chimed. I pretended I didn't know what he was thanking me for.

In the schoolyard, Aaron and Oscar were waiting for me at the usual place, near the girl's entrance. We decided to play tag. Oscar was "it".

At first he came after me, but I easily outran him. Then he tried Aaron, but he also proved too elusive. In the end, he tagged Baruch. Immediately Baruch tried to tag him back, but Oscar quickly slipped out of reach. He then tried catching me and Aaron. He was no match for either of us. After only a few minutes it became obvious that Baruch wouldn't catch any of us, unless we let him. He tired much too quickly and he ran with a stilted, awkward hop. Still, his tenacity and perseverance won him our respect.

Baruch was chasing Aaron again when suddenly he stopped in mid-stride and doubled over with his hands over his face. He seemed to be in pain. I ran over to where he was crouching. "Are you all right?" I asked him as I approached.

He looked up through spread fingers and whispered between gasps of breath, "Yes, I'm all right." Then, suddenly, he was standing again. He reached out, touched my arm lightly and ran off laughing. "I tricked you! Now you're it!"

I laughed. So did Aaron and Oscar.

From that day on, Baruch joined us regularly for recess and lunch. When we played our games, we were easier on him. Sometimes we'd even let him catch us (though we tried to make it appear as if he had done it on his own).

The next week, Baruch brought a small magnetic chess set to school. I played him during lunch time. He won two and we tied one. Aaron and Oscar also played him, but they offered even less competition. Still, it was a pleasant change from our usual games.

Pretty soon Aaron was bringing his chess set also and during lunch we split up into pairs and played round robin. We set a pattern. During recess we played outdoors; tag, British Bulldog, hide and seek, and at lunch time we played chess.

At chess, Baruch reigned supreme. He won consistently and needless to say, the three of us felt humbled and inadequate. But the sting of defeat was softened by Baruch's good-naturedness. It's true he glowed with pride at each victory, but he did not gloat. Instead,

he assumed the role of teacher. He made suggestions, offered criticisms, pointed out errors, explained openings and defenses, all in a quiet, unpretentious way which did not seem condescending or demeaning. Besides, we appeased ourselves with the fact that he was inferior to us when it came to games that involved running.

Occasionally though, we'd put aside our games and just talk. At these times Baruch was usually at the centre of things. We were amazed by his knowledge of all kinds of strange facts. He could talk for hours on almost any subject and we took great pleasure in listening to him. He would ramble on and on excitedly, his hands waving as he spoke, his head tilting from side to side. He'd make little jokes and giggle at his own silliness. Then he'd continue in a serious tone.

Sometimes he would help us with our homework and other times he'd teach us new games, like "ghost" and "jotto" and "battleship". At school, the four of us were inseparable.

One day when recess was over, we all lined up together. Baruch was breathing hard and his face was whiter than usual. Oscar slapped him on the back and said, "You know, in the beginning I wasn't sure if I'd like you. But you're okay. Really." Baruch blushed and his face turned from ash white to deep crimson.

And then Aaron added, "So I guess the three musketeers

are now the four musketeers."

Baruch smiled a happy smile. His red face seemed all aglow and between gasps of breath, he giggled, "Well, maybe just three and a half."

It was mid-April and much of the snow in the schoolyard had already melted. There were spots where large patches of grey concrete lay exposed between even larger areas of brown snow and ice. Temperatures were mild and we ran around playing tag with our open coats flapping at our sides.

Aaron was it. He was chasing me. I was very close to the frost fence so I tried to make a sharp turn, but I hit a patch of ice, lost my balance for an instant and then, just as I was regaining control, I crashed into someone who had stepped in front of me. I went sprawling, head first, into a pile of mushy slush. I was a little disoriented for several seconds and lay there, face down, my clothes soaking up the half-frozen wetness. "Why don't you watch where you're going, you idiot?" I screamed. "Shit! I'm all wet."

I started to get up and as I turned to see who I'd hit, I was suddenly horror-stricken. There, looming over me with his hands on his hips and his jowls fixed in a bulldog sneer, was Warren McGovern. "What did you say kid?" he growled.

I felt weak in the knees. My blood seemed to freeze

in my veins. I could feel a light wind blowing at my soggy clothes and I began to shiver both from cold and fear. I muttered and blubbered and stuttered an apology. I tried to gather my strength to stand up so I could wipe the cold brown muck from my clothes. But before I was even half-way up, Warren raised a clenched fist and threatened, "If you even try to stand up, I'll smash your fuckin' face in."

I remained on my knees mumbling apologies and whining.

Suddenly, little Baruch was standing between us. He looked like a midget standing in front of this brutish and massive adversary. "Leave him alone," he said in his tiny, chime-like voice. "He meant no harm. You can see it was just an accident."

Warren jumped back and raised his arms in mock terror. Then he laughed. "Oh, a Jewish hero? . . . Get outta here ya little squirt or I'll break your face too."

But Baruch did not move. He stood rigid, his arms folded across his chest and his round, brown eyes stared up into Warren's Neanderthal face.

Without warning, Warren made a jerky move with his left hand and then out flew his right. In a flash, he whipped off Baruch's skull-cap. With an exaggerated motion, he held it up to the small crowd that had gathered to see what was going on. "Gee that's pretty," he said sarcastically. "Your mommy make it for you?"

Baruch responded meekly, "Yes."

"What did she do, cut her bra in half?" Warren howled and looked around for approval from the crowd. There was a sprinkling of nervous laughter. Warren turned back to Baruch. His smile was gone and he yanked at the cap in an attempt to tear it. It stretched out of shape, but would not tear.

I was still kneeling in the slush behind Baruch. I reached up and touched his arm, trying to prod him to retreat, but he shook me off. "Give it back!" he screamed, his voice cracking and his cheeks turning red.

Warren snickered, "So you want it back? Okay, here." He reached out his hand, but just as Baruch stepped forward to retrieve his cap, Warren pulled back a few inches. Again Baruch came forward and again Warren drew back. As Baruch moved a little closer, Warren's free hand came flying out and smacked Baruch's face with a resounding whap.

Baruch was thrown several feet and landed, face down, on the concrete. I ran over to him, "Are you all right?"

He rolled over and looked up at me. His hand was bleeding from a scrape. His lower lip was split and blood was oozing from it and dribbling down his chin. Half his face was puffy and red and a distinct impression of a hand could be made out. He spit out some blood. "I'm all right," he said and he began to rise.

I grabbed his shoulder and held him down. "Look, let

it be," I warned. "Stay down! He'll just hit you again. You don't have a chance against him." But my warning was of no avail. He pushed me away, stood up and charged.

Warren was laughing. "That's the thing about Jewish heroes. They never know when they're whupped." He stretched out a straight arm and placed his hand on Baruch's head, keeping him at a distance. Baruch was swinging wildly, but it was futile. Suddenly, Warren grabbed Baruch's hair, pulled him forward and down and lifted his knee smack into Baruch's face. As Baruch doubled up, Warren's fist came crashing across the side of his head.

Baruch went down, writhing in agony, hands covering his face. "Do you give?" Warren taunted as he kicked Baruch in the chest. "Do you give?" he repeated and kicked him again and again. Baruch curled up into a ball, but he did not say anything.

I was crying. Tears were streaming down my face as I knelt there on the ground. I felt helpless, but I could stand it no more. I threw myself at Warren's feet. "Stop! It's enough! Please stop!"

Warren stepped back. He looked down at me and then turned to see the faces of the crowd. Those faces were expressionless and silent. He walked over to where he had thrown the skull-cap and stomped on it. Then picking it up between his thumb and forefinger (as if he were

holding up a dead rodent), he walked over to where Baruch lay curled up on the ground and dropped it on him. "Here's your hat, hero." Then he coolly turned around and walked away, arms swinging and shoulders swaying.

Aaron and I helped Baruch up and brought him to the washroom. He was limp and we had to support him on our shoulders. He moaned and whimpered and sobbed quietly. His face was bloody and the split lip was purple gushing red. A mixture of blood and mucus dripped from his nose. His face was lumpy and swollen. There was a tear in his corduroy trousers, at the knee. The hole exposed a scrape that was raw pink and slowly oozing blood.

We washed his face and made him lean back to stop the nosebleed. "I told you to stay down! Why did you mix in anyway? You shouldn't have. It wasn't your fight," I said. Aaron agreed with me. Baruch continued sobbing, but he did not say anything.

When his nose stopped bleeding, we brought him to the principal's office. His lip was still dribbling red and he held a piece of toilet paper to it. We left him there. The secretary sent us back to class and assured us he would be well taken care of.

The next day, when we saw Baruch was not in school, Aaron and I went to the principal's office to see if we could find out what had happened. The secretary told us

that Baruch would be all right. We also learned that Warren had been "strapped" and suspended for a month.

So far as we were concerned, this punishment was insufficient in view of the crime he had committed.

That week the three of us put aside all our games. Instead, we spent our time discussing the incident. Oscar had not been in school the day it happened and when Aaron and I told him about it, he seemed to doubt our story at first. But when he saw our concern he began to believe.

What could have induced Baruch to act so brazenly, so out of character? "It showed great courage," Aaron said. I agreed, but inside I could not help thinking that it was more foolish than courageous. It was suicide! Why would he do such a thing? Loyalty? Perhaps. But no one could have doubted his loyalty even if he had not mixed in. Oscar suggested that Baruch might not have been aware of the danger of intervention. "But I warned him about Warren months ago," I argued. "So, maybe he forgot," Oscar retorted. We discussed it for hours. Still, in the end, we were just as confused as when we began.

When Baruch was still absent the following Monday, we became worried. Could he have been seriously injured? Crippled? Disfigured? Absurd! We had been with him after the beating. He was badly hurt. True, but that bad?

By Wednesday our curiosity and fears had reached fever pitch. Some action had to be taken. After some discussion, we decided to go to his house to see him and find out for certain what was happening. After school, the three of us met at the usual place. We each contributed a few pennies from our lunch money and bought a large chocolate bar at the corner grocery. Then we marched to Baruch's house.

When we arrived, I rang the bell. Oscar and Aaron, stood behind me while we waited impatiently for someone to come to the door. It seemed a long time before his mother answered.

She was a short, thin woman, younger than I had expected. Her skin was pale, almost yellow and her eyes were like round blue marbles. She wore a green kerchief on her head and she was holding a spoon in one hand. Her face betrayed no emotion when she saw us, but in her features I thought I detected great suffering.

"My name is Eric," I said. "And this is Oscar and Aaron. We're friends of Baruch's. . . from school. We came to see how he is. We brought him something." I held up the chocolate bar.

Mrs. Corbin reached out and took our gift. She looked worried and tired and her sombre expression did not change. "I'm afraid you can't see him. He's sleeping now. But he'll be back in school soon. You'll see

him then." She stepped back and began to close the door.

"I. . . I'm sorry about what happened," I whispered.

A half-smile broke on her lips. "It's not your fault," she said. "Everything will be all right. . . I'll tell him you came." Then she silently swung the door shut.

On Monday Baruch came to class late. He walked rigidly, as if each movement caused him great pain. Half his face was bandaged and only one of his eyes was exposed. It was puffy and black and blue and red. His lower lip was swollen and the split in it was raw. It looked like it was still bleeding. He handed a note to Miss Mitrovka and then quietly took his seat next to me.

I threw him a reassuring smile, but he did not look in my direction. So I tore a scrap of paper from my notebook and wrote, "Welcome back. How are you feeling? We missed you." I folded it neatly and placed it on the edge of his desk when Miss Mitrovka turned to write something on the blackboard. He left it where I put it and did not read it.

I wondered at his silence. Why didn't he respond? Was he angry with me? What did I do? It's true, it was for me that he suffered. Perhaps he hated me for that. But I didn't ask him to get involved. I even warned him to keep a low profile. So why was he avoiding me?

When the recess bell rang, Oscar and Aaron and I gathered 'round him. We bombarded him with questions, all of us talking at the same time. "How are you?"

"Why did you mix in?" "What were you trying to prove?"

He averted his gaze and looked down at the floor. He remained hidden behind a mask of stoic silence. We continued to badger him, but that silence persisted. Finally, Aaron and Oscar became frustrated and left, but I would not let up. I continued interrogating him.

Still, he kept his face down and said nothing. "Look, you can't keep this up forever. These things happen,"

I said, getting a little exasperated. "I told you he's a mean person. I warned you to keep away from him. . . .

You know, they biffed him and suspended him for a month."

Suddenly, he looked up from the floor and gazed intently at my face. His one exposed eye was half closed and bloodshot, but there could be no mistaking the anger and hatred that manifested itself in that look. It was a look so full of bitterness and hostility that I shrank back in awe. We stood there for a while, just looking at one another in silence. I was filled with a strange feeling that I could not explain. I was staring at a complete stranger.

For a long time, neither of us spoke. Then, quietly, in a voice that was almost inaudible, he said, "He's not a person. He's a filthy beast. A wild dog. He should be

put to sleep like other sick animals." Then he was mute again. . . A moment later, the bell rang and we went shuffling back to class.

In the following weeks, Baruch slowly recuperated. His face was gradually restored to its cherubic shape and the bandages were all removed. His eyes were round and clear again and he walked less rigidly (though his comical little hop did not return). In fact, the only visible evidence that remained of that fateful day, was the split in his lower lip. The lip wasn't swollen anymore and the split was narrower, but it was still blood red in the centre.

However, his peculiar behaviour persisted.

In the beginning, the three of us tried to cheer him up. We made jokes. We challenged him to games of chess. We tried drawing him into conversation. Nothing worked. He stayed close to us but he always seemed to be somewhere else. He just sat there, withdrawn, silent and brooding. He refused to participate in all our games. He never laughed - never even smiled. He didn't speak unless he was spoken to and then, his responses were always short and curt. Nothing interested him. He was a completely changed person; pensive, fidgety, irritable.

It was obvious that his encounter with Warren was the cause of Baruch's moping silence. When nothing else

worked, I began to believe that the only way to help him, was by coaxing him to talk about the incident. Several times I brought it up, but he always evaded the subject. Even when I asked him a direct question, he remained silent. Only twice did I succeed in getting any response from him.

On the first occasion, I had said to him, "You know, it's all in the past now. It's something you should forget. What can you hope to gain from all this hatred?"

His answer was simple. "Satisfaction," he said. "Satisfaction!"

The second time, the two of us were standing in the hall waiting for class to begin. Again, it was I who broached the subject, "Why can't you forget it?" I asked.

He was leaning against the wall, his eyes downcast and his hands in his pockets. He was silent for a long moment and I was certain he was going to ignore my question as he usually did. But then, in a voice that sounded as if he were talking to himself, he said, "I tried. I really tried. . . I just wanted to reason with him. . . to show him that fighting couldn't solve anything. But he didn't even listen. All he wanted was to inflict pain. All he understands is violence. . ."

Aaron, Oscar and I tried desperately to understand

his anguish. We tried to empathize, to sympathize. But all our efforts were useless. Eventually, he became a burden to us. We found that his depression was contagious and we also began to feel morose and irritable. In the end, we decided it would be best to just ignore him and let time do the healing. Yet even this proved impossible. In some strange, inexplicable way we felt directly responsible for his well-being. And so, our relationship with him continued, but it was no longer a friendship.

The weeks turned to a month, then two. It was June already; only a week and a half left before school broke for summer vacation. Each day, the sun shone in a clear, blue sky. Small, bright green leaves miraculously appeared on trees and bushes. The streets were dry and sandy. It was warm and we played outdoors in our shirt-sleeves or light jackets. All seemed well with the world. Everyone was excited and happy, but Baruch was still silent and moping.

Aaron, Baruch and I were leaving the school at the end of the day. As we stepped out into the bright sunlight, Aaron suddenly stopped. There, in front of us, leaning against the fire escapes, talking to some girls, was Warren. He didn't notice us standing on the steps. "Come on," said Aaron, "let's go back in. We'll leave by another door."

I agreed. I reached out for Baruch's arm and pulled lightly to make him come with us. But Baruch would not move. In a resolute, assertive tone he said, "No. I won't run and hide all my life." His eyes narrowed and he nibbled at his lower lip. After a moment's hesitation, he shook himself free from my light grip and started walking steadily forward with his hands in his jacket pockets and his head held high.

Aaron and I stared in amazement; confused, petrified, quivering.

Baruch continued walking resolutely forward until he was only one step away from where Warren was standing. There, he stopped. For several seconds Warren ignored him, but finally he turned to Baruch. "What do you want, squirt? Trying to be a fuckin' hero again? You know what happens to heroes."

Baruch stood erect, hands in his pockets, eyes up, looking directly into Warren's face. "Well, go on kid. Scram! Your mommy's calling you," Warren barked.

Baruch didn't even wince. He continued to gaze up at Warren and then, in a voice that sounded like someone else's, he said, clearly and distinctly, "You're a fucking animal."

Aaron and I were both aghast. We came running and stopped on either side of Baruch. Warren's face was flushed with anger. "What did you say?" he growled.

"He didn't mean it! He's not feeling well," I blurted out in Baruch's defence.

Warren looked down at me through half-closed eyes and dismissed me with, "When I want comments from the peanut gallery, I'll ask for them." Then he turned back to Baruch, "Well, come on hero.. What did you say?"

In that strange, unfamiliar voice, Baruch repeated himself. "You're a fucking animal."

Warren's eyes grew wide with rage. He lunged forward, grabbed Baruch by his jacket and pulled him close so their faces were only inches apart. Baruch's toes barely touched the ground as he dangled there in Warren's iron grip. At point-blank range, Warren spat into Baruch's face.

Suddenly, Baruch pulled his hands from his pockets and thrust a flashing fist into Warren's mid-section. "You dog! Filthy dog!" he screamed. He continued pounding Warren's belly to the rhythms of his screams, "Filthy dog! Filthy dog!"

Warren's face went white. His eyes seemed to pop and from deep in his throat came a horrifying, guttural scream. Warren released his grip on Baruch. He staggered back, arms clasped over his belly, and slumped to the ground. He was gasping and wheezing and groaning and gyrating in convulsive spasms.

At that moment, everything seemed to stop. Even today, that scene sticks in my mind like a yellowed

photograph stopping time.

A thin ring of people encircled Baruch and Warren. Aaron was standing next to me; body rigid, mouth agape, lips trembling. Beside him, a girl was kneeling on the ground, her face buried in her hands. Another girl was crying. Tears streamed down her cheeks and dripped from her chin. A boy was running his fingers through his short-cropped hair. In the centre of the circle, Baruch was standing over Warren's shaking body with his hand outstretched. Everything was glistening red. The blade, Baruch's clenched fist, his sleeve - all of it drenched in glistening red. Warren was rolling on the ground, gasping, coughing blood, eyes clenched shut in pain. From his belly, blood oozed out between his arms and flowed onto the ground around him so he lay in a growing scarlet puddle.

Slowly, cautiously, I approached Baruch and laid a hand on his shoulder. He was standing still, eyes staring blankly ahead and muttering over and over, "Filthy dog. Filthy dog."

Carefully, I pried the knife from his hand and let it fall to the ground. My fingers were red. Then, gently, I put my hand behind him and prodded him toward the fire escape where I made him sit. He offered no resistance. He just stared straight ahead with glazed eyes and continued muttering, "Dog. Filthy dog."

THE ART CLASSES

Every mother looks at her child and sees a potential for greatness. Any slight behavioral pattern or unimportant incident is liable to be misinterpreted by her as an "indication" of promise and what was originally insignificant, suddenly becomes an "omen." If a kid dissects a frog, his mother instantly assumes, "He's going to be a surgeon. Already he's practicing for later."

My mother was no exception. She was certain she had a potential Marc Chagal or Norman Rockwell for a son.

As a child, I used to spend a lot of my spare time doodling and this immediately set her wondering. But what really convinced her, was an incident which occurred when I was twelve years old. Three of my sketches were selected for a large exhibit of "Elementary School Art"

and they were hung in a museum. For my mother, this was the clincher. "Twelve years old and already they're hanging his pictures in museums."

A few months later, when she heard about the after-school art classes, she decided to enroll me. So far as she was concerned, the time had finally arrived for my talents to be nurtured and moulded. She could not allow me to pass up this opportunity. It was time to start preparing for my future and she, as custodian of my fate, was determined to insure for me a future of fame and fortune as an artist.

I was opposed to the idea. It's true I enjoyed drawing, but I did not share her aspirations. I had no real passion for art. Besides, if I took those classes, I would have to stay late three days a week and that meant I couldn't walk Lynne Bernstein home from school. I was in love with Lynne. She was a popular girl and if I didn't walk her home, I was sure some of the other guys would lunge at the opportunity to take my place.

But my objections went unheeded. My mother conspired with my uncle Glazer, who was already a successful artist, and the two of them badgered me regularly. Glazer's argument was always the same. "You have to learn about other methods," he would say. "You can't draw with crayons and pencils all your life. You know, when you want to say something, it helps if you can speak the language." To

this, my response was always the same: "But Glazer, I have nothing to say." Then I would turn and walk away before he could continue. My mother, however, was more insistent. From her I could not just turn and walk away. When I tried, she followed me.

Each day, when I came home from school, I was subjected to a barrage of new arguments from my mother. I think she spent her days preparing rebuttals for our evening encounters. Eventually, I succumbed to this constant harassment and I agreed to give the art classes a chance.

.....

I was uneasy as I walked down the long corridor toward the open door. I could hear boisterous chatter spilling from the room and reverberating in hollow tones through the empty halls. Above that, I could hear my heart pounding. My stomach was queasy and my hands were sweaty. "No reason to be nervous," I kept repeating. "No reason to be nervous." When I reached the open doorway, I stopped and peered in.

The room was crowded. There must have been at least forty students sitting and standing in disarray - all of them talking, laughing, yelling - all of them jabbering at once. There were no familiar faces among them and it

was obvious that they were all younger than I. Some of them looked like first-graders. On the far side of the room, leaning against the window ledges, stood several mothers. They were also talking, but to each other.

I considered leaving. No one would miss me in this turmoil. I could easily escape. If I hurried, I might even be able to catch up with Lynne before she got home. But what if my mother found out? No. I had agreed to give it a chance. I had an obligation to fulfill.

I walked in and headed for a corner of the room where I might be left alone. Some girls giggled as I squeezed past them. One even called out something to me. I just smiled and walked on.

For several minutes nothing happened. Then, gradually, the chatter began to subside. I could hear a matronly voice calling out over the din, "Quiet now, so we can begin. Quiet, please!"

I looked up from the floor. At the front of the class stood a short, plump woman with dyed red hair. She wore a colourful, flower-printed smock over a pale blue dress and tear-shaped spectacles rested low on her fat nose. Both arms were up and her hands were motioning for silence. After about a minute, the room was still.

"All right, my name is Mrs. Kotler and I'm going to be your teacher. This is Susan," she said as she

turned toward a dark-haired girl who was standing beside her. She also wore a flower-printed smock over her dress. I guessed her to be about seventeen and she was very pretty. She had large warm eyes, full lips and a small upturned nose. "She's my assistant and she'll be helping us with our work. Susan, would you please give out the paper and crayons." Then, turning back to the class, she added, "Would everyone please choose a seat now."

Immediately, people started to push and shove in an attempt to secure seats near their friends. I didn't move. I stood in my corner and waited until everyone else was in his place. I had no preferences. Besides, I was busy staring at Susan as she walked from desk to desk, distributing large sheets of paper. She was moving slowly down the aisle toward me when suddenly, she looked up and our eyes met. I was embarrassed and I glanced aside. I pretended I was looking for a seat and then hustled away toward an empty desk at the front of the room. I wondered if she realized that I was staring at her.

When everybody was settled, Mrs. Kotler spoke again. "Okay, now let's begin. I want you all to make a picture of anything you like. It can be scenery or people or animals or anything. I'll come around in a little while to see how you're doing."

All at once, the chatter erupted again. I sat back

in my seat and pondered the teacher's instructions. I resented the condescending tone of her voice. "Anything. Draw anything. This is dumb! I could do this at home. For this, I gave up Lynne?" Again I considered leaving and again I decided against it.

While I sat there thinking, I looked around the room to see what the others were doing. Most of the drawings that were visible were of a simple nature. The faces were large round circles with dots and lines indicating features. Bodies were stick figures, trees looked like lollipops that had been drawn out of proportion and birds were made of two joined curved lines.

A boy at the desk next to mine was adding a neck to a large circular face. He had used colour to amplify certain features. The eyes were small green dots, the lips, a curved red slash, and the cheeks, two pink circles. Curly brown spirals sprouted from the top of the circle and a black "L" signified the nose. "It's my mother," the boy said as he turned toward me. "Do you like it?"

I smiled. "I hope she doesn't really look like that," I said.

The boy looked from me to the picture and then back again. His mouth twisted into a tearful frown. "What's wrong?" he whined.

I was taken aback by his response. "Oh, I was just kidding," I said. "It's not really bad." He smiled at

me and then returned to his drawing.

In the meantime, Mrs. Kotler and Susan made the rounds. They stopped at each desk for several seconds, Mrs. Kotler made a comment or two and then they both moved on. Soon, they reached the front of the room. I still hadn't made a single line on the large white sheet in front of me. Mrs. Kotler and Susan stopped at the desk next to mine. I overheard Mrs. Kotler say, "And what's your name?"

"Larry."

"That's pretty good Larry," she said. "You've got the idea."

"It's my mother," he said proudly.

Mrs. Kotler smiled and patted his head, "You're very lucky to have such a pretty mother, Larry." Then she and her assistant approached me. "And what's your name?" she asked.

"Eric."

"Is anything wrong, Eric?"

"No."

"Then why haven't you done anything?"

"But I did."

"That's just an empty white sheet of paper," she said, motioning toward the page with her hand.

I looked up at Susan and smiled, "It's a picture of a blizzard."

Susan tried to suppress a giggle. She threw a hand over her mouth and turned away so Mrs. Kotler wouldn't see. I was pleased with her reaction.

"Eric, this class will be over soon," Mrs. Kotler said with subdued anger in her voice. "Before you leave, I expect you to have something done." She motioned for Susan to follow and began walking to the next desk. As Susan passed, she winked at me and then whispered, "Add some more snowflakes."

I sat motionless for several minutes. I could not decide whether to comply. "That's pretty good Larry. . . You're lucky to have such a pretty mother." What a hypocrite! This wasn't an art class. It was a nursery! I wanted to leave - just walk out without saying a word, but I had been through that before. No. I had a better idea. I would do exactly what she had asked of me.

I reached for the crayons and began drawing. I made a large brown pyramid in the centre of the page and then added a few strokes of green and yellow. Then, using a black crayon, I placed several dots indiscriminately over the sheet. When I finished, I put away the crayons, sat back and waited.

It was almost five o'clock when Mrs. Kotler and Susan approached me again. I pretended not to notice them while they examined my picture. Finally, Mrs. Kotler said, "Well, I'm glad to see you've done something. It's

pretty good. Is it an Egyptian pyramid?"

"Well, not exactly," I said.

"Then what's it supposed to be?"

I tried to control a smirk and then, using a matter-of-fact tone of voice, I answered, "It's a great big pile of shit." And pointing to the black dots, I added, "Those are flies."

Susan burst into laughter again, but Mrs. Kotler was not amused. Her steel-blue eyes narrowed behind the tear-shaped lenses and tight, wavy creases formed on her forehead, but she controlled the anger in her voice. "Eric, why are you here?"

I shrugged, "I'm not really sure. I was sent here to learn about art, but I seem to be in the wrong place."

"Well Eric, if you won't cooperate, then don't come anymore." She threw me one last piercing glare before she turned and walked away. Susan, whose face was still flushed from the laugh, followed quietly behind her.

.....

At home, my mother was eagerly awaiting my return.

"How did it go?" she asked the moment I stepped through the door.

I walked past her to my room and threw my books on the bed. "Is supper ready?" I demanded.

"It's on the table," she called from the kitchen.

I took my seat and started into the soup without a word. My mother sat on the chair opposite mine. She was silent too. She just sat there, leaning on her elbows and stared across the table at me.

"Ma, I finished the soup. What's next?"

She rose slowly, walked to the stove, and filled a plate with potatoes and chicken. She placed the plate in front of me and sat back down in her chair. "So? How was it?"

I ignored her question again. "You know I hate boiled potatoes," I snapped. "Why didn't you make rice?"

"But you've had rice every day this week. I only thought. . ."

"I'm not eating the potatoes! Tomorrow, I want rice."

"All right, Eric," she sighed. "Tomorrow."

For several minutes we were both silent. I could feel her eyes on me as I picked at the chicken, but I did not look up at her. Finally, she began again, "So how did it go?" she asked in a soft voice.

"It was a disaster! It's not an art class! It's a kindergarten!" I threw my fork on the table. "I was the oldest one there. I'm not going back!"

"But I already paid for the whole semester."

"Too bad! I'm not going back!"

She leaned forward and smiled. "It was just the

first class. Remember, you promised to give it a chance. You'll see, it'll get better."

I stood up and began to pace. I knew that if I persisted in my refusals, she would continue to harass me. This was something I wanted to avoid if at all possible. Besides, there was some validity to her argument. It WAS just the first class. It's true Mrs. Kotler was a bitch, but Susan seemed nice. She was pretty and she had a sense of humor. Maybe things would get better. But what if they didn't? Suddenly, I had an idea. Perhaps I could strike a bargain. "I'll make a deal with you," I said thoughtfully. "I'll go two more times. If it doesn't get better, that'll be it. I won't go back and you won't argue. Okay?"

She leaned back in her chair and examined me with stern grey eyes. She seemed reluctant to accept my proposal. Still, I suppose she realized that she didn't have much choice in the matter. In the end, she agreed. I was pleased and I congratulated myself for being so shrewd.

As I left the kitchen, she called after me, "I forgot to tell you. Bernard called. He wants you to call him back."

Bernard wanted to know how the class had gone. Did I like it? Did I know anyone? How was the teacher? I

wasn't in the mood to discuss it so I dismissed his queries with a simple, "It was all right." I'm certain he detected the lie, but he did not question me any further. Instead, we talked about his Bar Mitzvah lessons and his fear that when the time came, he would forget everything he had learned. I pointed out that I had had the same fears, but that in the end, all had gone smoothly. Then I asked him if he had seen Lynne after school. He hesitated a moment before answering, "Yes, I saw her. . . Barry Kerstien walked her home."

I was deeply disturbed by this bit of news, but I did not let on about it. I quickly changed the subject, and for the next few minutes, I kept the conversation light. When I felt that enough time had passed, I told him I had to get off because my mother needed the telephone.

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On Tuesday, Lynne was absent from school, but on Wednesday, she was back again. I stayed with her during recess and I told her what had happened at my first art class. She laughed and said she would have liked to be there so she could see the look on Mrs. Kotler's face. I explained that I had promised I would go back that afternoon and again on Friday, but the next week I would

be free, once more. Neither of us mentioned Barry Kerstien.

.....

When I came in, the room was just as crowded as it had been the previous class. The chatter was just as unordered, the chaos just as complete. The mothers were propped at their posts along the window ledges and it seemed to me that their number might have increased.

When Mrs. Kotler brought the class to order, she gave her instructions for the period. "Today we're going to draw people. After you've taken your places, I want you to choose someone next to you and use him as a model for your pictures. If you want to, you can do just the face or the entire body - as you like. I'll be around later to see how you're doing. Susan will be here in the meantime, so if you need any help, you can ask her." Then, she left the room.

I chose a desk at the front of the class. From there, I could see out the door. Mrs. Kotler was standing in the hall talking with two mothers. All three of them were smoking cigarettes.

I turned my attention to the people around me. To my left sat a girl of about nine or ten. Her face was studded with freckles and her frizzy red hair was tied

at the back with a blue ribbon. A bushy pony-tail hung half-way down her back. "Not very interesting," I muttered.

Next to me, on the other side, was the same boy to whom I had spoken the last class - Larry. He had already begun his portrait. It was much like the one he had done previously. Only the colours had been changed. "Not very interesting either."

Just then, Susan walked by. I ran up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. "Excuse me, I was wondering if you would pose for me."

"What about the people next to you?" she asked.

"They're taken."

"But I don't really have time and. . ."

"I'll be quick, I promise."

She hesitated a moment and then grinned. Tiny laugh wrinkles appeared at the corners of her eyes.

"Well, all right. But I may have to leave in the middle."

"No problem," I assured her.

Using a pencil, I began the portrait. I started with her face and once I had gotten the features in proportion, I filled in her long wavy hair. "Do you mind if I draw you with fewer clothes than you really have on?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, trying hard not to shift position.

"Well, that smock. It's not very flattering, you know. I'd like to eliminate it." I had already drawn in the shoulders.

"No. I don't mind. That's called artistic license."

I worked as quickly as I could and after a few minutes, I had the outline and feature proportions down with light pencil strokes. I had brought my own coloured pencils and using these, I began doing details. I used a pale, rosy pink for the cheeks and dark brown for the eyes. When I finished the face and shiny brown hair, I stepped back to get a better look. I was pleased with what I saw. In fact, it was the best thing I had ever done. It actually looked like her.

"Eric, I have some things to do now," Susan said.

"I'll be back as soon as I can."

I nodded and went back to my drawing.

Susan did not return until I had almost completed the portrait. I glanced over my shoulder and saw her standing there with a silly grin on her face. I could feel my face flush.

"You said you'd take the smock off, but you didn't say anything about drawing me completely naked."

"Let's call it artistic license."

She smiled at my remark and then stepped a little closer. "It's really very good. . . You've got talent Eric. It looks just like me, I think." She ran a finger

along the edge of the page. "But my boobs aren't that big," she said in a whisper.

"I'm sure I'd get it right if you showed me where I've gone wrong," I quipped.

She laughed. "You're a real smart-ass, aren't you? Maybe I'll show you some other time. In the meantime, I think you'd better add some clothes or the old battle-axe will throw a shit-fit when she sees this."

"I don't care about her."

"I know, but why make problems?"

I was silent for a long moment. I did not like the idea of compromise, but I did not want to start an argument with Susan either. In the end, I agreed. Using a purple pencil, I covered the crucial areas with a dress. "Is that better?" I asked sarcastically.

"I suppose it'll do," she sighed. She continued to examine the portrait. "I'm really impressed," she said after a pause.

"Susan, I'd like you to have this," I stammered. "That is, if you want it."

A shy smile crept across her face. "I'd love to have it," she said. "Thank you. . . You know, in some ways you're very nice." She leaned forward and kissed me lightly on the cheek. Her lips were warm and moist and for several seconds, I felt them on my cheek - even after she had stepped back. She looked at the portrait

once more, and then walked away.

When class was almost over, Mrs. Kotler came back into the room. With Susan at her side, she walked from desk to desk appraising the work that had been done.

When she reached my desk, she stopped to get a good look. She stepped forward, then back and then forward again. "That's really excellent, Eric," she said, "Excellent! It looks just like Susan." She looked over at her assistant and then turned to face me. "You're very talented and I'm glad to see that you've decided to cooperate. If you don't mind Eric, I'd like to keep this. I want to show it to some people."

"You'll have to ask Susan," I replied. "I've already given it to her."

Mrs. Kotler said nothing at first. She looked at me, then at Susan and back again. She muttered another compliment and started toward the next desk. She did not motion for Susan to follow.

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When I got home, my mother was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee with Uncle Glazer. Neither of them said anything to me, so I went to my room and put away my books. A few minutes later, my mother called me for supper.

While I ate, my mother quietly sipped her coffee and casually glanced across the table at me. Whenever I looked back at her, she averted her eyes. Glazer was also silent. He drank his coffee with loud gulps, dragged deeply on a cigarette and flicked his ashes nervously, even when there were no ashes to flick. I could sense their discomfort. I knew they were both curious about my reactions to this art class. Finally, my mother ventured a remark. "So, how was your day?" she asked in an attempt at subtlety.

"Not bad," I confessed. "Today's class was much better than the first one."

My mother's face broke into a smile. Even her grey eyes, which rarely betrayed emotion, seemed to glow. "You see, I told you it would get better."

Glazer was also grinning. "You see, it's good to learn about new methods of expression," he said. "If you want to say something, it helps if you can speak the language."

When I finished eating, Glazer asked if I wanted to play chess. I declined. I went back to my room and spent the rest of that evening alone with my sketch pad, drawing and thinking about Susan. That night, before I went to sleep, I decided that I really did want to become a successful artist.

.....

The next morning, on my way to school, I met Bernard. He told me that he had seen Lynne the previous day and that she had walked home with Barry Kerstien again. I felt a slight twinge of discomfort on hearing this, but the feeling passed quickly. I told him that I didn't care anymore. I had met another girl. "No. Not a girl. A woman. A mature woman." I described Susan to him and without realizing it, I found myself embellishing the importance of my relationship with her. "She kissed me in front of the whole class. . . She even promised to model for me in the nude."

I could see that Bernard was impressed.. "Really?" he asked, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"I swear it's true," I answered.

.

On Friday, I actually found myself looking forward to my art class. I could hardly wait for school to end. I sat at my desk, doodling in my notebook and counted the minutes as they ticked by. When the final bell rang, I was greatly relieved. I gathered my books quickly and hurried downstairs.

I arrived early and found the room only half full. Susan stood at the front of the room, talking to Mrs. Kotler. She smiled at me as I entered. I smiled back shyly, then took my regular place and waited quietly for class to begin.

Minutes later, Mrs. Kotler brought the class to order. "Today we'll work with water colours," she announced in her matronly voice. "Do whatever you want to. I'll be around later to see what you've done." Then she walked out into the hall for a cigarette.

This time, I did not question her instructions. I immediately set to work on a landscape. First, I drew a rough outline in pencil and then began applying the paint. I used a pale blue wash for the sky and a bright green for the grass. I worked slowly and carefully, concentrating on each stroke. I was determined to make this a masterpiece.

When I finally looked up from my page to see how the others were doing, I noticed Larry sitting at the desk to my right. He was working on yet another circular face - orange hair this time. Behind him, the red-headed girl with the freckles was adding black dots to the centres of red and yellow and blue flowers.

Suddenly, through the corner of my eye, I glimpsed a flash of shadow passing over my picture. As I spun around to find its source, my face collided with something soft and yielding. It was Susan. I had struck her, full-face, in the breast. "I. . . I'm sorry," I blushed.

She pretended not to notice my embarrassment and continued to examine my painting as if nothing had happened. "This is really good, Eric," she said at last. "I'm very impressed with your work."

"Thank you," I whispered shyly.

Just then, a voice called, "Susan! Susan!" A boy at a desk three rows over was waving his hands frantically. He had spilled water all over his shirt and pants and he looked as if he were on the verge of tears.

"Well, duty calls," she sighed as she turned to face me. She hesitated for a half second, smiled warmly, and then walked to where the boy was still waving his hands and calling her name. I watched her for a long moment before returning to my painting.

I was deliberately slow in cleaning up after class that day. I lingered at my desk until everyone else had gone. Only Susan and Mrs. Kotler were left in the room. It took a long time, but I finally screwed up enough courage to approach Susan. "Where do you live?" I asked nervously.

"On Dorais, near College... just across from the park," she answered. "Why?"

I was feeling self-conscious and I looked down at the floor. "It's on my way home," I muttered. "I thought maybe we could walk together."

She laughed. "Sure, I'll only be a few more minutes."

I was silent most of the way. I didn't really know what to say. Fortunately, Susan didn't suffer from the same problem. She talked freely about herself and about the art class and Mrs. Kotler. Her voice was soft and

warm and seductive. It had a mellow, musical quality to it and without realizing, I began listening to the sound of her voice rather than the things she was telling me. It was such a beautiful voice - peaceful and tranquilizing, like a hymn. I walked along beside her in a daze, barely noticing anything around me.

"This is the place," she said as we came to a stop in front of a large bungalow. After a short pause, she added, "Well, I guess I'll see you on Monday." She stepped closer and gently, laid a hand on my shoulder. She leaned forward and kissed me.

It was no more than a light brush against my cheek, but in my mind, its significance was magnified a hundred fold. Still, I could not let her know this. "I won't wash for a week," I said jokingly.

She smiled, "I don't think that's a good idea. You'll get pimples."

We both laughed. Then she turned and climbed the stairs leading to her front door.

When I got home, my mother greeted me at the door. I was feeling light and giddy and when she said, "Hello," I burst into uncontrollable laughter. She eyed me suspiciously. "Is anything wrong?" she asked. I was laughing too hard to respond, so I ignored her question and went to my room. My mother followed me. "Are you all right?" she demanded. I finally managed to suppress my

laughter long enough to answer, "Yes, everything is fine. . .just fine." Then I excused myself and went to the bathroom. I locked the door and thought about Susan.

.....

In the weeks that followed, the art classes became increasingly important to me. I still didn't like Mrs. Kotler, but I made peace with her anyway. I followed her instructions implicitly, and she, in turn, treated me civilly. Every time she approached my desk, she would make the same comment about my work. "That's very good, Eric. Yes, very good. . .I was wondering if maybe I could keep this. I'd like to show it to some people." Sometimes I complied, but usually, I gave Susan first choice.

My relationship with Susan had grown considerably during this time. In fact, she was the main reason I returned to class after class. We had become friends and when she wasn't busy, she'd stand near my desk and talk while she watched me work. After class, we always walked home together. Sometimes we held hands or walked arm in arm and quite often, we'd sit on her front steps and talk for a long time before she went in. We discussed all kinds of things and we made intimate confes-

sions to each other. Still, I never found the courage to tell her how I felt about her.

So far as I was concerned, I had finally found true love. I was convinced that this was not an immature infatuation like my relationship with Lynne. This was the real thing, with a real woman. But I was torn between two opposing perceptions of my predicament. At times, I was practical and realistic and at other times, I let my fantasies and hopes take hold.

On the practical side, I realized that there was an obvious problem of age between us. Once, she had even asked me how old I was and though I had always been completely honest with her, the lie came easily to my lips. "I'm fifteen, but I lost two years in school when I came from Sweden." It's true I looked older. I was already taller than my father and I even had fuzz growing on my face. That was something a lot of fifteen-year-olds lacked and I was sure she had accepted the lie without question. But even with the lie, I was still too young for her.

However, in my mind, I built fantasies around her. I dreamed things I could never believe might happen. I translated all kinds of insignificant gestures as "indications" of promise. Sometimes, I even had difficulty separating what actually happened from what I hoped would happen. Whenever I discussed Susan with Bernard, I found

myself embellishing the facts. Half truths and outright lies found their way into my reports until eventually, truth and invention welded into one confusing whole. The more I talked, the more confused I became.

One Saturday night, after the hockey game, Bernard and I sat in his room talking. He pulled a copy of Playboy out from under his bed and turned to the centre-fold. "Want to see a pair of big bazooms?" he said while he carefully unfolded it. "Nice, eh?"

I glanced at the photo with feigned nonchalance and shrugged, "It's just a picture. . . Susan's just as nice, and at least she's real."

Bernard put down the magazine and studied me for several seconds before he spoke. "Do you think anything will happen between you?"

I threw him a disdainful glare and then leaned closer. "Things are happening much faster than I expected," I confided in a barely audible whisper. "Yesterday, after I walked her home, I kissed her good-bye as usual. . . Do you know what she did then?" Bernard inched closer so as not to miss what I was about to say. I leaned back in my chair and waited a moment before continuing. Finally, when I was sure he could stand it no longer, I said, "She shoved her tongue into my mouth and rubbed her tits up against me." At this, Bernard's eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped. He stared at me in be-

wildered silence. The lie was worth the look on his face. "You'll see, pretty soon I'm going to go all the way with her," I added confidently. "You'll see."

"Do you think she's a virgin?" Bernard asked.

"No, of course not!" I chided. "She's not a girl. She's a woman!"

"You'd better get a prophylactic," he suggested.

"Just in case. . ."

"A what?" I said.

Bernard laughed. "A safe! It's the same thing. Prophylactic is the proper name," he explained. "My father buys them by the gross. He's got hundreds of them in his night table."

I sat up again and leaned closer to Bernard, "Do you think maybe you could. . ."

"Sure!" he giggled. "I could steal one for you. He'd never notice. I've stolen some before, to make water bombs."

I patted him on the shoulder. "Do me the favour. . . just in case."

And so it went; depressing practicality on one side and blissful fantasy on the other.

.

I was working at my desk one Friday afternoon,

oblivious to what was going on around me, when Mrs. Kotler approached with Susan. Both of them were smiling broadly and I could read excitement in Susan's eyes.

"Eric, I have some wonderful news for you," Mrs. Kotler announced. "You've won twenty-five dollars for one of your pictures."

I was confused. "What are you talking about? Won what? How?"

"The contest at the Showmart. You were one of the runners-up!"

I looked from Mrs. Kotler to Susan and back again, "But I didn't enter any contest. How can I win if I didn't enter?"

"Well, do you remember those pictures you gave me? I entered some of them in the Amateur Art Contest at the Showmart," Mrs. Kotler explained. "That portrait you did of Susan was chosen for a runner-up prize of twenty-five dollars. You have to go there tomorrow to collect it."

All at once, I felt a fluttering queasiness in the pit of my stomach. The portrait of Susan? How could Mrs. Kotler have entered it? I had given it to Susan. It was a present from me to her. How did Mrs. Kotler get it? I looked down at the floor. "Tomorrow? Oh, I can't go tomorrow. I have a Bar Mitzvah to go to," I lied. "Maybe you could do it for me."

"But it's your prize. I can't collect it for you."

Mrs. Kotler protested.

"You entered for me, you can collect for me," I answered angrily.

Mrs. Kotler was stunned. She looked over at Susan and then turning back to me, she asked, "Aren't you even excited or proud?"

Of course I was proud, but I was also hurt. Why did Susan give her that picture? In as bland a voice as I could muster, I said, "Ya. . . Now, can I finish what I'm working on?"

Mrs. Kotler let out a deep sigh. "You like being difficult, don't you?" When I did not respond, she shrugged. "Okay, you win for now. I'll see what I can do about picking up your prize." Then she walked away.

Susan, who had been silent throughout the entire exchange, stepped closer to me. "You really don't care one way or another?" she asked.

I looked up into her face. I tried to force a smile, but inside, I was deeply disturbed. "We'll talk about it later - on the way home. Okay?"

She searched my face with her large brown eyes. I could see she was confused. "Okay," she conceded. "On the way home."

It was only 5:30 when we left, but already, it was dark outside. I opened the door for Susan and a blast of icy wind sent a shiver through my body. Up above, a low-flying jet roared across the night sky, its lights flashing red and white.

We walked slowly, side by side, neither one daring to initiate any conversation. I could feel the tension between us as if it were a concrete, tactile thing. What could I say? How could I explain my actions without betraying my feelings for her at the same time? As we started to cut across the park, I finally broke the silence. "Are you mad at me?" I asked.

"No," she said softly. "Just confused. . . Why did you act like that?"

"Like what? I didn't do anything," I protested.

"I know. That's what I mean. Anybody else would get excited, giggle, jump up and down, run around the block fifteen times. . . I don't know! But I know one thing. They'd react! And you. . . you didn't even say thank you."

"Thank you? For what?"

"Ya know, Mrs. Kotler doesn't have to go traipsing down there for your prize. And if she hadn't entered your work, you wouldn't have won. She was really hurt when you acted like that."

"So?"

"What do you mean, 'so'? Doesn't it mean anything when someone tries to help you?"

"Help me? SHE didn't help me!" I retorted. "I made that picture and she had nothing to do with it! The old battle-axe hasn't taught me anything! Of course, now, when I win this prize, she acts as if it's all her doing. But she doesn't know a thing about art. She's just a baby-sitter for a bunch of kids with crayons."

"Then why do you keep coming back to class?" Susan screamed.

I turned my face away from her. "I don't know," I muttered. I shuffled over to a nearby bench and flopped down. Susan hesitated, then sat down beside me. Another jet roared across the sky and I waited until it faded into the distance before I spoke. "In the beginning, I came because my mother forced me into it. The only reason I come back, is because of you."

I glanced over at Susan. She was staring down at her feet and the harsh white light from a street lamp fell full on her face. She sat with her arms folded and said nothing. It was so quiet that I could hear the distant drone of traffic from the Trans-Canada almost half a mile away. After several minutes had passed, she turned toward me. "Let's go," she said in a soft voice. "I'm starting to get cold."

When we reached the walk in front of her house, Susan

laid a hand on my arm and squeezed gently. "Well, we're here," she said. "You know, this is really silly. We're both being unfair." I nodded in agreement and she continued, "Do you want to come in for a while and warm up?"

It was the first time she had ever invited me in and I was taken by surprise. "No, I don't think so," I said, feeling suddenly nervous.

In the pale night light, I could just barely make out a smile creeping across her face. "Oh, come on," she said. "Just for a little while. Okay?" Without waiting for a reply, she took my hand and led me up the stairs to the front door.

Susan pointed to a room on her right. "Go in and make yourself comfortable," she said. "I'll be with you in a moment."

It was a large room with bay windows. Bookshelves lined two of the walls and a royal blue carpet covered the floor. A fireplace jutted out from the far wall and on the marble mantle above it, several small porcelain statues rested on white paper doilies. Above the statues, hung a large oil painting. It was a picture of two horses running through a black, featureless landscape. They were dark silhouettes riding on the horizon against an orange and pink and purple streaked sky. The artist's name was inscribed with bright red paint in the lower right-hand corner. "Robert Taub" it read.

I laid my books and coat on an armchair in the corner and then sat down on the sofa opposite the fireplace. When Susan came into the room, I was still looking at the painting. "Who's Robert Taub?" I asked. "He's got the same last name as you. Is he a relative or something?"

"He's my father. . . Why do you ask?"

I pointed to the painting. "Is your father an artist?"

Susan laughed softly. "I should have guessed. . . No, he's a lawyer. He only paints in his spare time. He's awfully proud of that one though. Anytime someone new comes into the house, he brings them right in here to show it off. He's like a kid sometimes."

"He paints well," I said.

Again, she laughed, "Not really. That's his best and quite frankly, it took more luck than talent. I can show you some of his other work, if you like."

I shrugged, "Actually, I think I'd rather see some of your work. . . Would you mind?"

"No, I don't mind," she said. She motioned for me to follow and with a quick, springy step, she started down the hall. We passed two closed doors and then stopped in front of the third. "This is my room," she said as she opened the door.

It was a cozy little room. The bed was covered with a brown corduroy spread and two bolsters were propped

against the wall. An old wood desk stood next to a bureau and a folded easel was leaning in a corner. One wall was covered with pictures (some overlapping), giving the impression of a collage. Among them, I recognized some of my own. "Did you do all of these?" I asked as I crossed the room.

"Well, not counting yours, I did - except that one," she pointed to a water-colour landscape. "My friend Irene did that one."

I examined each picture separately while Susan sat down on the bed and watched in silence. Finally, she asked, "So, what do you think? Do they meet with your approval?"

"They're very good," I said. "Really."

Susan giggled, "You sound just like the old battle-axe when you say that."

I scowled at her, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. . ."

"Don't apologize," she said. "I'm flattered."

I stepped back from the wall and looked over at Susan. "Why is my stuff up there?" I asked.

"Because it's good," she responded. "I've kept all the pictures you gave me."

Those last words of her's stung me like salt on a wound. Suddenly, I remembered the portrait and the prize and Mrs. Kotler. Up to this point, I had managed to avoid all that, but now, the anger and pain I had experienced

earlier burst to the surface again and I exploded in a flood of emotion. "You didn't keep ALL of them!" I said accusingly. "You gave away the portrait I did of you."

As soon as the words were out, I regretted having said them, but it was already too late.

Susan shifted position uneasily. She averted her eyes from mine and stared down onto the floor. "So that's why you were upset about the prize," she said in a barely audible whisper.

"Yes," I confessed.

She looked back up into my eyes. Her face was pale, but her voice was calm and clear when she spoke. "It was the first time you really drew anything," she said as if in defense of her action. "Mrs. Kotler was so excited that I just couldn't say no. . . Do you know what I mean?"

I shrugged, "I suppose so."

I picked up a pencil that was lying on the desk and twirled it in my fingers. Susan watched me from her place on the bed. "Eric, are you angry?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm angry. I gave that picture to you! It was. . . well, in a funny way, it was special. Kind of mine and yours and ours and. . . I suppose it doesn't really make sense, but. . ." I stopped in mid-sentence and took a deep breath. "It's just that it was something I did for you and then you gave it to her. . ." I walked slowly toward the opposite corner of the room and sat down on the floor,

my back propped against the cold wall. I rested my shin on my knees and stared blankly down onto the floor.

Susan rose and walked sheepishly to where I was sitting. She knelt in front of me and putting her hand on my arm, she whispered, "I think I understand. . . I'm sorry." She dropped herself beside me and leaned up against the wall so our arms touched. After a moment, she bent over and tenderly kissed my lips. Then, she sat back again and laid her head on my shoulder.

We stayed like that for what seemed like a long time. I was calm now and I revelled in the warmth that radiated from her body.

Suddenly, she sat up and turned to face me. "Why don't you do another portrait of me?" she said. An impish smile broke on her lips. "This one will be for me, so you won't have to cover me with a silly purple dress," she laughed.

"Are you going to model for me?" I asked.

"You mean, in the nude?"

That was not what I meant, but when she suggested it, I decided to take advantage of the opening. I winked at her and said, "Of course in the nude. You wouldn't want me to get the dimensions wrong again. Would you?"

"You don't think I'd do it, do you? You think I'm afraid, eh?" She jumped to her feet and looked down at me. She hesitated a moment, then slowly undid the top

button of her blouse.

"You're bluffing," I said.

"No I'm not," she said and she undid another button.

I stared at her in amazement. Would she really go through with it, I wondered. For weeks, I had hoped for something like this to happen, but now, when all my fantasies seemed on the verge of realization, I began to feel anxious and afraid. My fingers twitched uncontrollably and my stomach felt like it was doing somersaults. I could feel my cheeks growing hot and my hands started to sweat. I was dizzy with fear and excitement.

Susan continued to stare into my eyes and then, slowly, she reached for the next button. The borders of her lacy white brassiere were already visible and I could see the cleavage between her breasts.

All at once, she broke into laughter.

"What's the matter?" I asked apprehensively. I was worried that she had detected the bulge in my pants.

"It's just nerves," she said, turning aside. "I've never done this sort of thing before... I guess I'm chicken."

I was relieved by her modesty and I was more than happy to accommodate her. In fact, I was probably more embarrassed than she was. "Well, don't do it if you don't want to," I said.

"But I said I would," she responded. She turned to

face me again and then resolutely unfastened another button.

"Stop! It's okay," I stuttered. "Really it is. . . I don't think I'd be able to concentrate anyway."

She stared into my eyes for several seconds, then dropped to her knees and leaned in close to me. Her mouth was fixed in a wide grin and even her eyes seemed to laugh. She bent forward and kissed my forehead. "I really like you," she said and kissed me again. She lifted my arm and placed it around her shoulders. She curled up beside me and laid her head on my chest. Her blouse was still open and I strained my neck to get a better view of her half-exposed breasts. I was careful not to let her see that I was looking.

We must have been sitting like that for more than half an hour, when I glanced up at the clock on Susan's desk. Nine-fifteen it read. I was expected home for supper no later than seven and in my house, Friday's supper was a special occasion. Everyone would be there - my mother, my father, my brother and his wife, my uncle Glazer - all of them would be there, waiting for me. They would be furious.

I tapped Susan lightly on the shoulder and explained that I had to leave. She looked up, kissed me on the chin, then lay her head on my chest again.

"Come on, Susan. Get up," I implored her. "My

mother's going to kill me."

She raised herself sluggishly. "Do you really have to go?" she asked.

"Yes," I assured her as I rose to my feet.

She followed me into the living room and after I had gathered my books and put on my coat, she walked me to the front door. I was about to reach for the doorknob, when she grabbed my arm. "Aren't you going to kiss me good-bye?" she asked.

As I leaned forward for my customary kiss on the cheek, she threw her arms around my neck and forced her lips onto mine. Before I realized what was happening, her tongue shot into my mouth. She squeezed her body up against me and I could feel the soft mounds of her breasts pressing against my chest. A thousand electric sensations coursed through my body at once. Time and space and awareness fell away into a deep, dark void.

I don't know how long that embrace lasted, but when she finally released me, I was dizzy and weak in the knees. I looked down and saw my books lying in a disordered heap on the floor. I bent down clumsily, gathered my books and stood up again. I was feeling terribly awkward. "Well. . .good night," I said. I reached for the door, opened it and stumbled out into the frosty night air.

"Good night," she said. She threw me a kiss and

then soundlessly squeezed the door shut.

.....

As soon as I opened the door, my mother came storming out of the kitchen, her eyes flashing, and one hand raised in a threatening gesture. She was screaming before I even stepped into the house. "Where in God's name have you been?" she demanded. "Everybody was waiting for you."

I gazed back at her as though through a mist. The entire scene seemed unreal to me. I was an observer watching a film or a play. Her words were intended for someone else. I stepped past her without a word and marched straight to my room.

My mother did not follow me at first. She stood frozen where I left her, apparently stunned by my behavior. But her shock did not last long. Seconds later, she charged into my room, her face flushed with rage. "I asked you a question and I expect an answer right now," she screamed. "Where have you been?"

I was lying on my bed, thinking about all the wonderful things that had happened to me this day. I had never been so happy in all my life. Susan was mine at last and even the thought of the prize I had won, filled me with pride. I looked up at my mother and smiled.

"What are you laughing at?" she yelled. "You think

it's funny? I'll soon smack you so hard you won't laugh for a year." She raised her hand high and lunged forward!

"I was with my teacher," I blurted out. "We were discussing the prize I won in the art contest."

She stopped in mid-stride and slowly lowered her hand. "What are you saying?" she asked, her brows knit in confusion.

Quickly, I explained about the art contest and my twenty-five dollar prize. As I spoke, my mother's face softened. By the time I had finished, she was smiling. "Are you telling me the truth?" she asked suspiciously. I assured her that everything I had said was true. She eyed me for a moment, then turned to leave. At the door, she stopped. "Come into the kitchen," she said quietly. "I kept some food warmed up for you."

"I'll be there in a minute," I said. "I just want to make one quick phone call."

"Well, make it fast," she said. Then she hurried out of my room.

I got up from my bed and slowly made my way to the den. I checked the hall to see if anyone was nearby; then I closed the door and dialed Bernard's number.

"You were supposed to call me at eight," Bernard said when he heard my voice. "Where have you been? I called you four times!"

"I was with Susan," I said meaningfully.

"Did anything happen?" he asked.

"I'm gonna need that safe right away," I told him.

"Why? What happened?" he asked. His voice was trembling with anticipation.

"Well, I can't really talk right now," I said coyly.

"Oh, come on Eric," he pleaded. "Tell me."

I hesitated a moment before answering, "Let's just say I had her almost completely undressed and the only reason we didn't go all the way was because you haven't come through with that safe you promised me."

There was silence on the other end of the line and I tried to imagine his face at that moment. I waited to see if he would say anything, but when his silence persisted, I said, "Listen, I have to get off now. I'll see you tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay," he mumbled. "Tomorrow. . ."

When I walked into the kitchen, everybody was talking about my prize. As I sat down among them, they patted my back and shook my hand and showered me with compliments and congratulations. They were all talking at the same time, but my uncle Glazer's voice rose above all the rest.

"You see," he said. "When you want to say something, it helps if you can speak the language."

I smiled politely, but I did not say anything.

.....

I spent Saturday night at Bernard's house, playing Scrabble. My mind was not on the games and he beat me three in a row. He challenged me to a fourth, but I refused. It was almost midnight. Time to go.

I put on my coat and gloves and I was just about to leave, when Bernard tapped me on the shoulder. As I turned to face him, he flashed me a conspiratorial wink. "I got it!" he squealed. "I got it!"

He reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a small, square envelope, and held it out to me. I stretched out my hand and took the tiny package from him. "Is this IT?" I asked, unable to control the excitement in my voice.

He laughed and nodded his head.

As I clasped the exotic prize in my fingers, a strange feeling of power and confidence pulsed through my body. The world was mine. Nothing could hurt me now. I was invulnerable.

I thanked him and left, still clutching the shiny little envelope in my hand.

.....

When I stepped out into the night, I was greeted by a magnificent spectacle. It was snowing - the first snowfall of the season. Everything was cloaked in a

soft blanket of sparkling white and a million glittering crystals danced through the air like a dazzling ballet of stars.

I ran out into the street, my heart pounding with excitement, my spirits soaring higher and higher with each stride. I could feel the snow crunching underfoot; could feel the wind licking at my face. I stooped to pick up a handful of fluffy whiteness, made a snowball and tossed it high into the air. I skipped along the deserted street, making pirouettes and bowing to imaginary ladies. I was delirious with joy.

When I reached the park, I looked out over the field toward Susan's house. From my vantage point, I could just barely make out the shape. It was no more than a vague silhouette, looming in the distance, against a dark grey sky. Still, just knowing it was there, filled me with a warm and satiating sense of security. It seemed to confirm my new-found confidence.

As I walked on, I thought about Susan. I thought about her eyes and her smile and her long, flowing hair. I thought about the warmth of her body and the gentleness of her touch.

I looked up toward her house again. I was closer now and could see it more clearly. As I stared at it, I noticed a black shape moving in front of her door. What could it be, I wondered. I tried to focus, but the army

of fluttering snowflakes obstructed my view. To my eyes, it was just a blurry shadow. However, the longer I looked, the more certain I became. That blurry shadow was a person. Could it be Susan? Was she standing on her porch, watching the snowfall?

The thought that it might be Susan sent a shiver of exhilaration through my body. I wanted to call out her name, but I suppressed the impulse. After all, it might not be her. It might be her father or mother or somebody else.

I quickened my pace, almost to a run and kept my eyes peeled to the shape in front of the door. The closer I got, the more distinct the image became. It was large and black and looked like a person. Finally, I was close enough to see it quite plainly.

It was not a person. It was two people and they were locked in an embrace. Was one of them Susan? No! It couldn't be! It must be her parents. Yes, that was it. . . her parents! That was the only logical explanation.

Still, I had to get closer - just to be sure.

Suddenly, I felt very vulnerable standing out in the open like that. If it WAS Susan, what would she think if she saw me here in the park at midnight? Would she believe that I was on my way home from Bernard's, or would she think that I was spying on her? I decided

that discretion was the only route under the circumstances, so I made my way to a row of shrubs and ducked behind them. Then, using the bushes for cover, I crept closer to Susan's house.

When I was finally in position, I raised my head and snuck a peak. Whoever it was, they were still locked in their embrace. It was dark and they were too close to each other for me to make out the faces. I squinted, but it was no use. I sat down in the snow and decided to wait until they separated.

A minute went by and they were still kissing. "It must be her parents," I repeated to myself. "It must be!"

Just then, a car passed. As it turned the corner, its headlights illuminated the scene for a split second. I still couldn't see the faces, but I did recognize the coat. It was Susan's coat.

Without thinking, I jumped to my feet and began running away. I bolted across the field and raced down through the street. As I sped around the corner, my legs flew out from under me and I went flying into a parked car. I was stunned and confused and I could feel a sharp pain in my side, but a second later, I was up and running again. Tears streamed down my face. My legs were weak and rubbery. I was gasping for breath. And still, I ran. I did not stop until I reached my house. There, I collapsed on the steps.

I was exhausted and aching. My heart pounded like a kettle-drum and my head throbbed to the rhythm of that drum. I let out a low, painful moan and buried my face in my hands.

It was then I realized that I was still holding the safe in my clenched fist. I opened my hand and stared at the crumpled envelope. It was just a crumpled envelope. I dropped it into the snow, then slowly got up and went upstairs.

That night, I cried myself to sleep.

.

On Monday, I did not go to my art class. When school finished, I waited for Lynne. I asked if I could carry her books. She smiled. Then, the two of us walked home together.

MARILYN

Words from filtered mouths hang suspended, cold and hard, and drift aimlessly, through the clatter of dishes from the kitchen.

We speak of times that have passed. Then, we believed we could never be strangers. Yet here we are, a small round table between us. You fidget with your keyring. I chew a toothpick. The old promises that have lain in bed with us have all been strangled and our memories are the only evidence that they had ever existed.

I remember that time, three years ago. We were making love. And in the middle of it all you said, "I don't deserve you. I could never keep up. You're too good for me." You always had the knack of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. Following an impulse, I

slapped you hard across the face. And defiantly, you asked, "Are you finished yet?" "No!" I shouted and hit you again and again and again. . . .

When I calmed down, I sat in the corner of the room, brooding, ordering my thoughts, playing guitar in the darkness. You sat upright on the bed. I watched your silhouette framed by the open window. Your breasts jiggled slightly with each sob.

After about twenty minutes, I stood up and opened the light. You sat motionless on the blanket, still whimpering quietly. The blood that had oozed from your nose and lip had caked on your chin and throat. The salt from your tears had reddened your cheeks. With a damp tissue (dampened with my own spit), I wiped your face clean. And kissing you on the forehead, I whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Don't ever do that again," you said.

And I excused myself once more. "I lost my temper."

"That's not what I meant. Don't (ever) apologize. It weakens us."

.

Now, you tell me that you are getting married in December.

You ask about my lover and I remember you more

clearly. Naked. You were shy that first time. And I
afraid to touch your breast.

But here, in this café, we dare not show our uneasi-
ness. Each of us clutches a porcelain cup filled with
coffee. You drag deeply on your cigarette. Your legs
are crossed.

OBSERVATIONS OF A STREET-WALKER

It had rained and the cobblestones were shiny from the wetness. The smell of raw fish lingered in the still night air and from across the street, an old woman near a cart called to no one in particular, "Bleuets, framboises, fraises." The sidewalk was crowded with people rushing in all directions.

As I passed a cheese-shop, the odour of Roquefort cut deeply into the raw fish. I stopped at a grocery stand to take a photograph of some figs, oranges and pomegranates. Several figs had been sliced open and the deep red flesh lay exposed and slimy. The proprietor and a wiry little man continued bargaining over price and paid no attention to me.

I walked on, weaving through the haphazard flow of

pedestrians. I stepped on something squishy. A tomato, I think.

At the corner stand, a short stocky woman, wearing a purple and white kerchief was turning roasting chestnuts to keep them from getting too charred. Her eyes were wet from the smoke. I raised my camera to see if I could get a light reading. She looked up and gave me a large toothless grin.

I passed under the arch and turned off Rue St. Denis onto Boulevard St. Michel. There were fewer people here and the sidewalk was much wider. Half-way down the block a small crowd was gathered in a semi-circle. I squeezed through to the front for a better look. (Maybe a picture.)

In the centre stood a man dressed in tattered formal, complete with tails and top hat. He took five cigarettes from a pack of Gallois, put them all to his lips, struck a long wood match and lit each fag. Then, one by one, he ate them. The crowd mumbled its approval and several individuals threw centimes. I snapped a photo.

I turned to leave and someone put a hand on my shoulder. I spun around.

It was the geek. His face was very close to mine. Thin lips were moist. Three hairs protruded from a nostril. I could see every pore.

In his left hand he had a razor blade and he held it

up for all to see. Without taking his eyes from mine, he opened his mouth wide. Thin lines of glistening saliva. A gold tooth. A yellow-brown stain on his tongue.

He pinched the blade between his thumb and forefinger and carefully placed it on the back of his tongue. Then, he closed his mouth and swallowed hard. When he opened his mouth again, the razor was gone. He flung his tongue out and wiggled it vigorously to show that there were no tricks.

No tricks.

I handed him a franc and started to leave. From the corner of my eye, I could see him walk around the semi-circle, his mouth spread and the yellow-brown tongue flailing wildly. I heard the sound of coins jiggling on cement.

.....

Rue D'Appelle is a tiny street that runs parallel to Boulevard St. Michel. I discovered it six days earlier and had (since then) made it my habit to walk its length each evening.

It's a very short street - only one block. Three-story hotels line both sides of the narrow lane and prostitutes stand at each doorway.

I enjoyed passing close to the girls - so close, I

could smell them and feel their body warmth. Often, I stopped (sometimes to light a cigarette, other times to tie a shoelace) and with eyes closed, I would fill my nostrils with their smell till my head swam. Then I'd move on down the street a bit.

I never let their eyes catch mine and so, with all the time I had spent on Rue D'Appelle, I had still never been propositioned. I suppose to them I was something of a non-entity. I wondered why for a moment and decided it didn't really matter. The idea of remaining anonymous appealed to me.

Many of the faces and costumes had become familiar. Most of the prostitutes were regulars and they stood in the same place each night. In my mind, I had given some of them names.

"Irma" was leaning against a black Renault. Her beige jacket hung from the shoulders, but her arms were not in the sleeves. Long silver earrings accentuated the delicate curve of her throat. She smiled at the man in front of me and then tilting her head slightly she whispered, "Tu veux?"

He ignored her and as he walked on, her smile faded.

The "Cat Woman" was also there that night. She had missed the two previous evenings (or maybe she had been occupied when I passed), but tonight she was back and standing in her spot near the fire escape. The musty

odour of her sweat mixed with the heavy fragrance of cheap lilac perfume.

"Lucrezia" and "Angel" were stationed below the sign of the "Le Caverne Hôtel" across the street. Together like that, one was forced to think of archetypal good and evil.

Lucrezia stood tall and mean. She seemed proud of her arrogance. The black body-stocking clung tightly to the contours of her lithe body and black leather boots rose to mid-thigh of her long slender legs. Glossy red lips were pursed in an almost sneer.

Angel was next to her. The orange light from the sign above her head reflected softly from her long blond hair like a halo. The white fur jacket was tight at her neck and her pale complexion seemed to radiate.

My mind was still on Angel when I felt a hand pulling on my arm. I turned quickly and found myself looking directly at a woman with large green eyes, an aquiline nose, clear pink skin and moist lips that were turned in a mischievous half smile. She was beautiful. Immediately, I named her Aphrodite.

She moved her hand from my arm and placed it on my chest and then ran the long red fingernails down toward my pants. She rested her hand on my belt and pushed her middle finger about an inch inside my jeans. Then tilting her head and smiling wider, she asked in a thick musical

drawl, "Veux-tu m'aimer?" Bright eyes were fixed on mine.

"Non, merci," I stammered. "Je suis touriste. Je regarde seulement."

She broke into a soft giggle and removed her hand from my belt. I could feel my face flush. I hesitated a moment and looked to the girl next to her (a stranger) for reassurance. She was laughing too.

I began walking quickly toward the nearest corner.

"Un photo peut-être?" screamed a mocking voice from behind me. As I turned toward the voice, the girl next to Aphrodite struck an obscene pose and cackled loudly. All around me I could see faces turn. I felt hundreds of incriminating eyes glaring at me, taunting me, ridiculing me. The entire street seemed to be leering at me.

In a panic, I moved off, almost at a run. At Strassbourg St. Denis I turned left and marched hurriedly until I got to the Seine. Only then did my heart stop pounding. Only then did I regain my composure.

From across the river, the flashing coloured lights of the Latin Quarter could be seen. I paused to take a light reading and then strolled across the bridge.

PASSAGES

I Passages. . . .

The door keeps everything

In this room

In this room.

It keeps everything else

Out.

The door is my keeper. —

.....

II Everyone Loves a Parade (A Parable). . . .

A long line of people are marching. From their feet,
a misty white cloud of dust rises, swirls in a crazy fren-
zy and then subsides.

You've been told to follow and you do not question. You follow every step until soon, it all becomes second nature. Suddenly, someone behind you taps you on the shoulder and says, "Excuse me, where are you going?"

You think for a moment, then point in front of you and respond, "I am following him."

The man behind asks, "And where is he going?"

Again you pause to consider. "I don't really know," you answer.

"Then why are you following him?"

And without having to think, you respond, "Well, if I didn't, I would be lost." He looks at you inquisitively. You continue, "I would not know where I am."

"And do you now know where you are?"

"Yes, I am walking behind that man and in front of you."

.....

III Morning Mourning. . . .

There is a dead man on the lawn in front of the house. The tender flesh is cracking in the mid-day sun. The skin is pale and greasy. One hundred people have passed him. Several have stopped to stare at the flies, the blood and the corpse.

Near the curb, a small man in a navy, pinstripe

jacket, nudges his neighbour with his elbow. "Will ya just look't that! Disgustin' ain't it? The blood an' the flies. 'Nough to make your stomach turn."

His neighbour nods in agreement. "Sure is."

Both men continued to stand and stare.

An ambulance arrives, its red light flashing and soon the dead man is taken away. A silver cuff-link remains on the grass.

I am called into the kitchen for lunch. A plate is placed before me and a pleasant, seductive aroma rises to my nostrils. It strikes me that I am about to eat dead bird. I decide to go out for a walk. I am not hungry anymore.

.....

IV God in the Afternoon. . .

Sun-queen cities with drooping breasts smile down from newsstand racks. People pass and do not realize that I am there, sharing the privacy of a public sidewalk with them.

A grey-haired woman stands vigil on the corner of St. Catherine and University. She smiles demurely to herself. She is not Jewish, I suppose. The woman is holding a large sign for all to read:

"FREE FREE FREE
A Beautifully Bound Edition
of
The New Testament
To any Jewish Person
Who Promises to Read it."

She has a permit, I suppose.

I go to a nearby restaurant and order a sandwich to take with me. I offer the woman my sandwich, saying, "Free, free, free. A beautifully toasted edition of a lox and bagel sandwich to any gentile who promises to eat it."

She ignores me and remains at her post. She is not hungry, I suppose.

I offer the pigeons in the park the same deal. They do not ignore me. They gather round and accept my offerings graciously. Pigeons are less discriminating than grey-haired ladies on street corners, I suppose.

.

V For the Love of God. . .

San Kirtan have just arrived in a black S.O.S. taxi. They are wearing pink and yellow togas over their street-clothing. "Chant Hare Krishna and your life will be sub-

lime. Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna."

They offer pedestrians several pamphlets and a magazine for money. (It is their way of making a prophet.)

The magazine is colourful and pretty. "Return to Godhead" it announces in bold white lettering.

They chant, "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare." It is medicine for the soul and the process is called "transcendental medication."

They dance as they chant.

Jaya Pataka plays tabla with white, taped fingertips. The small tuft of hair, on his otherwise shaven head, bounces up and down with every movement to the music that Jaya makes.

Passers-by stop and watch. They are amused. They buy magazines and pamphlets. They snap photos and point. Near the curb, a small man in a checked jacket is laughing. He nudges his neighbour with his elbow. His neighbour laughs too.

The chant gets progressively louder and faster. Jaya's fingers are only a white blur. Louder, faster. Then, on a given signal, they stop. After a short rest, they gather themselves and hail a passing cab. A gold, Diamond taxi pulls up to the curb and San Kirtan get in. They leave, taking Nirvana with them.

.....

VI A Modest Proposal . . .

There is a public toilet at the park. It is underground. I go down the stairs and the steaming, stinking heat greets me. It seems strange to me - I am going down, into the bowels of the earth - to piss.

I choose a clean, white porcelain urinal. A man approaches the urinal next to mine. His urinal is not as clean as the one I have chosen. There are several cigarette butts soaking in the yellow liquid that has settled over the blocked drain.

He turns to me and says, "Hey fella, you wanna get laid?"

I look at him carefully. He has short well-groomed black hair and he is wearing tight black pants under a tan sport-jacket. He is chewing gum. He is not at all like the other men who frequent this place. They are (for the most part) derelicts and tramps who gather in the park to sit and talk to their peers and sneak inconspicuous sips of cheap alcohol. They rarely speak to strangers unless they are asking for spare change. "Not by you," I reply.

"Of course not by me! I'm talkin' 'bout a woman." He winked at me, "Knows how to please. Only fifteen bucks."

"I'm sorry. I only have eleven dollars and forty-three cents to my name."

"Well man, what is your name?"

"Eric."

"Mine's Tony. That's a nice name you got. Tell you what Aaron, she's yours for ten. That'll leave you a couple o' bucks."

"The name is Eric and thanks, but no thanks."

He shrugs, "Okay Aaron, suit yourself." He pulls up his zipper, gives me a last piercing stare, then turns and walks to the sinks. The taps on the soles of his black boots clack loudly as he walks. He pauses in front of a mirror and admires his reflection. After passing a comb through his hair in slow, even strokes, he turns and walks out. The clickety-click of his steps fade gradually until the only sound left in the sweltering men's room is the steady hissing of the urinal plumbing.

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VII Interview with the Suppliant. . .

There is a tall concrete building; square, harsh, imposing. It has nine hundred windows, but no one will open any for fear of losing air-conditioned comfort. The windows face other structures - giant grey cubes - monuments to progress. Each of these structures also has nine hundred closed windows.

I am about to cross the street, but what I see makes me stop. In front of me, lying in the middle of the road,

is a dead dog. One of its eye-sockets is empty and the red-black hole is filled with a glossy, semi-clear mucus. Several cars did not swerve around the battered carcass and the deep impressions of tire tracks are embedded in the matted fur. The puddle of blood that has oozed from the gaping mouth is still fresh. The accident must have occurred in the last half hour. I walk on to the corner before crossing the street.

Finally, I reach my destination. I enter through large glass doors and find myself in a glossy, white lobby. On the far side, chrome elevator doors, cut into marble walls, slide open, invite me in. A bell sounds, a green arrow points upward.

Men wearing finely tailored suits hustle past me. Women in tight skirts scurry in all directions, their high-heeled shoes clicking on the polished stone floor. No one seems to be talking, yet the echoes of muffled murmurs drift constantly in the cooled air.

Carefully, I pick my way through the rushing throngs. When I reach the marble wall, I push a button and wait for the silver doors to part again. I wait for the elevator to carry me up.

Six other people come into the arborite box with me. We are all silent. The only sound is the electric whirring drone of the machine we are in.

A distinguished-looking gentleman with greying side-

burns is staring at me. His blue eyes scan me from head to foot and back up again. When his eyes meet mine, he glances aside, as if embarrassed to have been caught looking. Though no words have passed between us, I sense that he doesn't like the way I'm dressed. . . or perhaps it's the length of my hair he objects to. But then, maybe it's just my own paranoia.

A muted "ding" interrupts my wondering. Number twelve lights up. The electric whirr slows, my stomach knots, the doors slide open.

Three other people are disembarking here, including the distinguished-looking gentleman. We all move toward the opening at once. The gentleman throws me a severe look and I step back to accommodate the others. He is the first out.

Room 1201. A woman in her early thirties is sitting behind a large metal desk, talking on the telephone. She holds her right index finger up to me and smiles apologetically. "Uh-huh. . . yes. . . Isn't that awful? Are you sure? . . Well, I guess if you heard it from Norma. . . uh-huh. . ." The finger goes up again, "Esther, I'll call you back, okay? There's someone here. . . I know. . . No, it won't be long. . . Bye-bye now." She places the receiver in its carriage and smiles as she looks up at me. "I'm sorry. Can I help you sir?"

"I'm here about the job in the paper."

"Oh yes. Just a moment, please." She pushes a black button on a rectangular box at the edge of her desk. "Mr. Gottlieb, there's someone here to see you about the job opening."

"All right, send him in," says a metallic voice.

The woman points down the hall, "First door on the left."

I knock. "Come in," says a voice from the other side. I hesitate a moment, straighten my hair, then opening the door slowly, I step in.

I find myself in a large square office. An oak desk, with several chairs placed haphazardly around it, stands in the centre of the room. Three walls are a deep red, and a plush carpet of the same colour covers the floor. Standing by the window, with his back to me, is a tall, broad man wearing a grey pin-stripe suit. I stop and await his response.

For several seconds he stands silently gazing out the window (perhaps at the dead dog in the street) and does not move. Then, as though he has suddenly realized that I am here, he turns to face me. It is the distinguished-looking gentleman with the greying sideburns from the elevator. He doesn't seem to recognize me. He raises an arm and motions for me to be seated.

"So you're here about the job, eh?" He reaches for a pen and a sheet of paper. "What's your full name?" he

asks and begins to scribble. "Address? . . . phone number? . . . age? . . ." he continues, constantly writing down my answers.

"Is this for full-time employment?"

"Yes."

"Bilingual?"

"Yes."

"Education?"

"Yes."

He smiles mockingly. "I know, but how much? High-school leaving?"

"Yes. . . And a B.A. with an honours in sociology."

He stops writing and looks at me through narrowed eyes. "I suppose you don't realize the opening is for a dress-packer," he says with measured coolness.

"I know, sir."

He sucks at his teeth. "Any experience?"

"Not really, sir. But I could learn."

"I suppose you could," he drawls. He places the pen on his desk. "I'm sorry," he says as he crumples up the paper he has been writing on. "You're over-qualified. I can't afford to pay you what you're worth."

"But I'd be satisfied with minimum wage. I have no money and I need work."

"I'm sorry, but I have to protect myself, you understand." He throws the crumpled ball of paper across the

room toward a wastepaper basket. The throw is just short of its mark. "If I hire you and you find a job in your field, then you'll leave and I'll be without. I need someone I can rely on."

"But..."

"I'm sorry, there's just no place for you." He rises and begins to walk toward the door. I rise and follow him in silence.

At the door, he stops. He reaches into his pant pocket and pulls out a billfold. "Here, take this." He thrusts a hand forward with a five dollar bill in it.

"I'm sure you'll find something. Just have faith."

I thank him and leave.

In the front office, the woman is sitting behind her large metal desk, talking on the telephone. "I wonder if she knows. . . I suppose so. . . No! She couldn't have. . . " She smiles broadly and waves as I open the door to leave.

In the hall, the elevator door slides open, invites me in, even though I have not yet pushed the button.

.

VIII Sparkling Water. . .

It is almost 4:30 p.m. I am hungry (again). I go to Marty's Burger Bar and order a hamburger, all dressed, and a Coke. I wonder why I have ordered Coke and not

Cream Soda, or Pepsi, or Orange Crush, or Canada Dry
Ginger Ale. I don't really like Coke any more than any
of the others, still, I always order it. It's the real
thing (Coke is). Holy water. To spill some on myself
would be like baptism. I pour the Coke all over myself.
The waiter looks confused.

I pay my bill and return to the park to lie in the
sun.

IX Post-Coitum Triste Est - Mourning. . . .

I am here, sitting on the grass, thinking about you.
Strange, I often think about you. Think about the way
you make me see. I have come so far and yet, this scien-
tific specific gravity that keeps us all involved with
bodies, still holds me chained to bedroom doors. I think
about that night when we lay together in my bed, naked.
The world outside forgotten - the world inside, non-
existent. My mind was blank and still, I was never more
certain that I was alive.

Only when you (k)needed me, did I discover my own
existence.

With a razor clamped between your fingers, you cut
yourself on the wrist and asked me to taste the blood.
I remember. I was disgusted. I thought you were sick -

I mean, really ill! Mentally! But I complied.

Then, you cut me on the shoulder and licked the blood that trickled down my arm and chest.

BLOOD. Salty. Warm. Thick. Wet. Alive.

I understood then that I could never be the same. I understood what I was and what you were and what we are. I understood that "together" was just a clear shade of plastic. I understood. . .

Strange, I often think about you. Think about the changes. Think about life, death, blood, salvation. Think about the dead man on the lawn (dried mucus on his face). Think about the blood and the flies, the blood and the flies.

.

X. Principles. . .

Bored and hot, I get up again and go across the street to cool myself in an air-conditioned department store. There is a "Record-Breaking Sale" in progress. "A Festival of Bargains."

I approach the girl at the information booth. She is wearing a navy and white uniform. "I am looking for apple pie and ice cream. Where can I find it, please?"

She looks at me questioningly, as if not certain about my request. After a long pause, she smiles at me

knowingly and points a forefinger to her right. "Go straight for about as long as you can stand it. Then, for God's sake, turn left."

"Thank you," and I begin walking.

A woman runs wildly toward me, screaming, "Help! Please! You've got to help! Please! That man! Help!"

A man in a tattered gray coat down to his calves, is writhing, pushing, pulling, screaming. An epileptic. I run to help the two men who are holding him. I grab him by the waist, clenching my arms around, trying to secure a hold.

"Okay, okay. Le' me go. I'll go with you. Jus' le' me go!"

The man's convulsions cease abruptly. It strikes me suddenly that this man is not having an epileptic fit. The two men I am helping are store detectives and they have just stopped this man from getting out with the pair of socks he has stolen. The woman who had approached me earlier is standing nearby.

"Please, let him go," I say to the detectives. "I'll pay for the socks. Just let him go. . . Please! I'll pay!"

The woman looks at me pityingly. "You don't understand, sir. It's not the socks, it's the principle of the thing."

.

XI Just a Dream. . . .

There is a long, white, empty corridor that stretches out for as far as I can see. It is well-lit. The neon-superficial-daylight reflects off white walls and shiny white-tiled floors, making my eyes cringe at the brilliance. The narrow corridor is lined with doors and even the doors are white.

I am feeling very small - yes, very small: . . . like an insect inside a long square tube - and the tube stretches out for as far as I can see.

I approach one of the doors, but when I get close, I see a sign on it. I couldn't see the sign before, because the message is written with white reflecting paint. It reads:

"THIS DOOR OUT OF ORDER
NEXT ONE PLEASE ———> "

I walk on to the next one, but it displays the same sign.

I cross the hall and approach another door. There is no sign on this one. I can hear a muffled scuffling from beyond the white barrier and so I knock, but after what seems like a long wait, there is no response. I knock again - louder this time. The muted sounds cease abruptly and after a short silence, I hear laughter - loud, squealy, piercing laughter. I try the handle. I

push. Nothing. I pull. The handle comes off and I am left holding the knob. I knock again, my hand clenched in a tight fist. The laughter gets more hysterical, but the door remains shut.

Frustrated, I run to the next door. It too is locked. When I strain my ears, there can be no doubt that someone is in there. I can hear heavy, wheezing gasps from the other side. I try to gain my composure. Relax. When I feel I have gained control, I knock (with considerable restraint). The response is the same as before - silence, followed by loud, hysterical laughter. I would knock again, but I know it is no use.

I look both ways down the corridor to see which end is closer - both directions stretch out to infinity. Angry, confused, desperate, not really thinking, I begin to run. No particular direction - I'm just running as fast as I can.

After what seems like a long time, I can hardly catch my breath. My legs are feeling numb. They move instinctively. I have a cramp in my abdomen. My sides ache. My head is spinning. My legs feel weak at the knees, but I keep running until at last, I collapse onto the white, tiled floor.

With much effort, I prop myself up against a door. My heart is thumping. I'm still breathing heavily - gasping - but I can feel my system slowing down gradually.

I look down the corridor. The end is not in sight.

From beyond the door, I can hear someone sobbing softly. "Who's there?" I ask in a voice much louder than I had intended.

The sobbing subsides, but no one answers. Again I call, "Who's there? I can hear you."

And then, as if from a great distance, a hoarse feminine voice calls, "What do you want?"

"I want to help you. You've been crying and I want to help."

And again the voice floats through from a distance, "Help me? You want to help me?... But it's you who needs help. . ." The voice breaks off and laughter begins.

"This is no joke," I scream. "It's not funny!" The laughter only gets louder.

I struggle to my feet. Still dizzy. Tired. Weak. I begin to run. The echoing laughter follows me down the hall. I run faster. The echoes begin to fade. Faster, until the laughter is left far behind. Then I stop.

I must catch my breath. The corridor seems silent. All I can hear is the steady pounding from my chest all the way up to the back of my head. I lean up against the white wall and stare across at a door which is directly opposite me.

Little by little my strength is returning. My heart-beat is not so loud anymore.

I cross the hall. Approaching carefully, I place my ear up against the door. I hear whispering. I can't make out the words, but I'm sure there are several people talking. I move back to the opposite side of the corridor and gather my strength, much like a bull before the charge. I rush forward with all my might and smash the door with my shoulder. It springs open and I go flying through. I crash into a wall, bounce off, and fall to the floor. Everything is reeling.

There are four, maybe five people standing in a semi-circle staring down at me. Their eyes are wide. My head is aching. My shoulder is pounding with a dull pain. It feels crushed. The people glance at each other and then, all at once, as if some secret signal has been given, they turn and run. They slam the door shut behind them.

I'm in too much pain to pay attention. I just lie there, looking around at these new surroundings.

I'm in a large, square room. Everything is white and I think to myself, this could be a hospital, but somehow I know it isn't. It's just a white room - no furniture, no decoration. Just white walls. White ceiling. White floor. White neon light. I doze off.

When I wake, I feel a little better. Slowly, I sit up and crawl to the door. There is no handle. It won't open. I am trapped. I accept this as if it were a major premise - to be expected. I crawl into a corner to rest,

to think, to ponder over my situation. Hours pass - perhaps days.

I am still sitting in a corner of this white room, thinking, when I hear something from beyond the door. Footsteps? . . . yes. . . footsteps. I hold my breath and wait. The shuffling sounds stop very close to the door and someone knocks. I want to answer, but I remain still. What can I say? Another knock. Louder this time. I still don't know what to say. I can only think of myself, standing out there, in that corridor, running from door to door, knocking, pounding, searching for a way out.

It makes me laugh.
